Madan no Ou to Vanadis Volume 02 Preview

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Please read Template:PREVIEW for further information.

These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 2

干魔と神の姫（ヴァナディース）2

川口士
Illustration よし☆ヲ

MF文庫J

「もう……どうしてあなたたちは、顔を合わせると喧嘩しかしないのかしら」

「光華の麗姫（ブレスヴェート）」ソフィーヤ

「どうだ？　お願いしますと頭を下げれば、その貧相な胸が大きくなる方法を教えてやらないこともないぞ」

「銀閃の風姫（シルヴフラウ）」エレン

「本当に下品ね、あなたは。このジスタートを守る戦姫としての見識も、知性も、品格も、露ほども感じられないわ」

「凍漣の雪姫（ミーチェリア）」リユドミラ

Dream of a Distant Day

Teita awoke in the night, just before dawn broke.

She washed her face with water she had prepared the previous night and tied her long, chestnut-brown hair along the left and right sides of her head into a twin-tail hairstyle. She opened the shutters throughout the house and began cleaning the kitchen and dining room with practiced hands.

After donning her maid's uniform, she quickly prepared breakfast.

“It's about time for him to wake up."

With the morning sun now shining through the window into the kitchen, Teita stood before the mirror while putting on her apron and thought about the Lord she served. Naturally, she began to smile.

“--- Good morning, Tigre-sama.”

Okay, all good.

Teita lifted the hem of her skirt as she walked up the stairs. She headed from the main area to a room deep inside on the second floor. Teita held a strange sense of duty to wake up this man who would sleep through the entire day if he did not have any business to take care of.

“If I don't do this, who will wake Tigre-sama?”

Tigrevurmud Vorn was the name of the Lord Teita served.

It was an exaggerated name the person in question did not seem to dislike, but for those more intimate with him, it was easier to simply call him Tigre.

Ever since they met when they were small, Teita did not stand much on ceremony and continued to call him Tigre-sama.

“He was up late last night, so he will probably sleep until mid-day... But I should still wake him up.”

While muttering to herself, she stood before Tigre's room. After taking a few small, deep breaths, Teita knocked on the door. Confirming that there was no reaction, she quietly opened the door.

A dazzling sword was pointed at Tigre as he slept on the bed.

“Tigre-sama...!”

Her face turned pale as she said those words. Teita quickly ran over and looked at the person hunched over Tigre, as if embracing him while holding the longsword.

She wore blue clothes and had impressive silver hair which reached her waist; she was a beautiful girl. She looked down at Teita in surprise.

“Y, you... Wha, wha, what are you doing...!”

Teita's voice trembled with surprise and anger. The girl with silver hair sheathed her longsword in a panic.

“No, sorry. I wasn't intending to threaten him.”

“Then what were you doing! In the first place, how did you even get in here?”

“From there.”

The girl with argent hair readily pointed to the window, which was currently wide open. She folded her arms and began to give an explanation.

“He wouldn't wake up no matter how much I called him, but then I remembered he awoke when a sword was put in his mouth. I wondered if he reacted whenever a blade was brought close... Well, I was having a bit of fun as well.”

She had become inarticulate toward the end seeing Teita glare at her, whose hazel eyes were now blotted with tears. The girl with silver hair became embarrassed.

“I wasn't going to hurt him, it was just some innocent fun.”

“Even if you didn't intend to, you could have hurt him !”

It was a just argument. The girl sunk into silence.

At that time, Tigre began to move beneath Teita.

“... Teita?”

Hearing a drowsy voice tickle her ear, Teita hastily parted from him.

With his red hair disheveled, Tigre sat up. After glancing at the two girls gazing at him, he looked to the open window.



As he looked at the light blue sky, a fresh breeze quietly stroked the three peoples' hair.

“What's with all the ruckus? It's still morning.”

“It is already morning.”

Teita firmly responded while blushing. Tigre, without noticing her appearance, looked about reluctantly as if he had no more choice. The girl with silver hair looked at him in embarrassment.

“What's wrong, Ellen?”

“No, it's...”

Teita explained the situation on Ellen's behalf. Once she finished, Tigre nodded and smiled at Ellen with a carefree look.

“It seems you saw something troublesome.”

“Honestly.”

“Tigre-sama!”

Teita shouted, making Tigre and Ellen cower on reflex. It was a childish gesture as she scolded the two like a mother.

Tigre, Teita, and Ellen sat around a table in the dining room.

At the table was rye bread, milk, soup with smoked fish, thinly sliced meat, and boiled egg.

Ellen sat at the table as if it were natural. Teita wished to say “I have not prepared enough for you,” but prudently remained silent.

Though she did not take well to the circumstances, she was Tigre's guest. As a maid, she could not be a disgrace.

--- I'll give her some rice while we eat.

Until today, Tigre and Teita had eaten with just the two of them. She wanted to return to the days before Tigre left for Dinant.

“So you eat your meal with your maid.”

While holding bread in her hand, Ellen asked as if it were unexpected.

"Teita and I are the only ones living here. It would be troublesome if we ate separately, and it's better for talking, especially since Teita takes care of the household for me."

"You're a busy one."

"I'm used to it."

Ellen glanced at her admirably. Teita simply bowed and responded curtly.

"By the way, what happened so early in the morning?"

Tigre asked after sipping his soup. Ellen took a drink of wine and responded.

"I'll be leaving here. I wanted to hear your future plans ."

"Future, huh?"

Tigre fixated his gaze on the table as his hands stopped moving.

Tigre was an aristocrat of Brune. He had lost his father

two years ago and succeeded his title and the land of Alsace.

On the battlefield of Dinant Plains, he became a prisoner of war to one of Zhcted's Vanadis, Eleanora Viltaria – Ellen. When told Duke Thenardier, a powerful noble of Brune, would burn Alsace to the ground, he borrowed her strength and returned.

Three days ago, Tigre defeated Duke Thenardier's forces. That night, his people and the soldiers were intoxicated in the feast of victory.

The day after that – two days ago – things had changed radically.

The dead were buried, funerals were held, and there were people walking around the town, rebuilding what had been burned down.

It was not just the people of Alsace but the soldiers under Ellen's command. Though they managed to salvage much of the buildings, it took until late last night to complete.

Today, he would have to think about what to do in the future.

--- Duke Thenardier will come since I killed Zaien.

The general of the Thenardier Army which attacked Alsace was Zaien Thenardier. He was the son of the Duke and future heir to his name.

Duke Thenardier was from an old, distinguished family which boasted enough power that it could not be ignored. He could easily move ten thousand troops, and, with the aid of his many aristocratic relatives, could gather a force which easily exceeded thirty thousand.

On the other hand, Alsace could gather at most one hundred men.

Though he could increase that number to three hundred, he would lose all the young men who were the main workers. The towns and villages would essentially stop functioning.

--- At best, ten thousand, at worst, thirty thousand...

It was an overwhelming difference. Tigre's face stiffened in tension and fear.

How did I get myself into this trouble? What should I do?

The anxiety which lurked inside him was that he had missed Duke Thenardier's true intent.

“Don't hesitate.”

A happy voice touched Tigre's ear. When he looked up , he could see Ellen smiling.

She stood up as if she were going to say something to Tigre before turning away.

“Decide what you want to do by the time we next meet. I'll leave most of the soldiers here. You'll be working as Lim's aide.”

“Aide?”

“This land belongs to me now. From your standpoint, you'll be assisting Lim.”

Ellen put on her mantle and gallantly walked forward. She threw a question to Tigre who was staring at her.

“Are you going to think about what to do from now on ?”

“I'll rack my brains with Lim so we won't lose this land.”

While listening to Ellen's footsteps as she walked away , Tigre sighed deeply and leaned against the backrest.

After finishing breakfast, Tigre went to the second floor. Rather than going to his room, he went to a small room at the end of the hallway.

It was a narrow enough room such that Tigre, who was average build and height, could not lie down. Leaning on a splendidly decorated stand was a single black bow.

The bow and bowstring were black, as if they were a condensation of the darkness. Rather than being dyed, the material itself was black. Tigre could not understand its character.

It was a family heirloom used by ancestors of the Vorn family who were hunters. He used it in the Molsheim Plains to shoot down Zaien and his Wyvern[Vyfal]. Tigre corrected his posture, steadied his breathing, and grasped his fist before his chest.

Tigre had greeted this bow, which had been passed down from generation to generation, immediately after he woke up every day since he was little. After pushing back the Thenardier Army, he greeted it after breakfast.

He needed physical strength, energy, and courage to stand before the bow.

--- *This isn't a normal bow.*

He heard a voice echo in his head when Zaien took flight on the Wyvern.

At that time, he shot down the Wyvern.

The arrow was normal. It should be impossible to hurt it, let alone penetrate its scales which could fend off sword and spear. He knew that best.

When he encountered an Earth Dragon (Suro) in the recesses of the mountain two years ago, every arrow Tigre shot left it unwounded. It was not a question of his capability.

However, after hearing the voice on the battlefield, his arrow flew and literally crushed the Wyvern (Vyfal).

The existence of this uncanny bow weighed heavily in Tigre's mind alongside his issue with Thenardier. Since it was an inherited family treasure, he could not treat it poorly, but he could not help but look at it as if it were a monster when he recalled the spectacle.

“What on earth are you?”

Tigre muttered before the voice.

Still, the bow did not answer.

Upon exiting Tigre's mansion, Ellen headed to the temple.

Though the one thousand troops Ellen had led to Alsace were spending their time in the plaza and vacant houses throughout the town, those who took command, including Ellen's adjutant, Limlisha, stayed at the temple.

Brune and Zhcted believed in the same Pantheon of Gods, so the soldiers were not particularly resistant to the idea. They could look up at the statues which enshrined the Gods they looked up to and remember their hometowns.

In the past two days, the soldiers had spent their time cleaning the town of all the stones and repaired houses which had started collapsing. It was worthwhile spending their time building something rather than destroying it.

The temple soon came into her view. As she opened the door, Limlisha – Lim – came into view. Ellen called out to her,

Lim noticed Ellen and returned a salute with a grave expression.

She was a tall, beautiful woman with golden hair tied on the left side of her head. Her face did not hold a single fragment of affability. She wore clothing the same blue as Ellen's and had a sword held at her waist.

She could be called Ellen's right arm. She served as an assistant in both military and political affairs.

"Do you have business you need to take care of right now?"

"No. I was going to visit you to ask the same, Eleanora-sama."

"No need to do that especially. Did you finish selecting the soldiers?"

It was a confirmation rather than a question. Lim nodded without batting an eyebrow.

"Rurick was made commander and he has chosen one hundred cavalrymen."

"I leave the rest to you. I need to return to keep the King silent. He's in your care until then."

Ellen began to laugh in a casual manner while Lim simply looked unhappy.

"Eleanora-sama, you seem to trust him quite a bit."

"I thought you did as well."

"Though I evaluate him to be reliable, I do not trust him."

Seeing her subordinate's stubborn attitude, Ellen shrugged her shoulders with a bitter smile.

“I got it, I got it. Anyway, I 'm leaving Tigre to help you.”

The Vanadis with silver-white hair waved her hand as she turned away while Lim saw her off with a bow. When Ellen disappeared from her sight, she leaned against a nearby fence and looked up to the sky.

The brightness of the blue morning sky still remained.

“I wanted to avoid getting more deeply involved... But there's no other way.”

Ellen moved her army due to good will toward Tigre.

Alsace was a barrier to prevent the spark of civil war from reaching LeitMeritz. They needed to confirm Duke Thenardier's intent and would intervene according to the turn of events.

--- Still... That battle at Molsheim Plains has changed a lot.

Though Lim had not seen it herself, many soldiers, including Ellen, had.

Tigre's arrow tore through the atmosphere and pierced through the Wyvern (Vyfal) with a speed and power impossible by normal means. It dispersed the clouds and disappeared from view.

She could not believe the tale so suddenly. The scales of a Dragon were strong enough such that blades of iron could not pass through. Furthermore, it would be impossible for an arrow to reach the Wyvern which flew high above.

--- But Lord Tigrevurmud pulled it off.

According to Ellen, Tigre's bow seemed to respond to her long sword – the Silver Flash Arifal. Though she had never heard of a weapon which could respond to a Dragonic (Viralt) Tool, Ellen was sure she had not made a mistake.

--- Even if ignoring her attachment to him... it would be best not to part ways now.

If another Vanadis learned of Tigre and the existence of his bow, they would act to take control of him. They may use him as an ally, or they may try to kill him.

--- Thinking along those lines, it is best to help him.

If a person with a power rivaling a Vanadis became an ally, it would be easy to maneuver in the future. Even disregarding that power, Tigre's skill with the bow was unusual, and there was no problem with his character as well.

However, a Vanadis prying into a civil war in Brune, especially one which involved a powerful noble, would cause a significant change.

Though Lim gazed at the sky while thinking, she eventually let out a small sigh.

"... This is for Eleanora-sama. I should do my best."

When Lim visited his mansion, Tigre was placing his saddle on the horse in the front garden. At his feet was a bag full of water and food. Nearby, the maid with chestnut-brown hair was locking the door.

"Are you going somewhere?"

Lim spoke with a tone as if cross-examining the two. Teita's body shrunk back in surprise as she heard the voice, while Tigre responded with a vacant expression.

“We'll be heading to the Village of Hunawihr for a bit. We should return by nightfall tomorrow.”

“Hunawihr?”

Lim was confused; Tigre answered as he checked the condition of his saddle.

“It is a village I can reach before day's end on horse. It's to the northwest, and Duke Thenardier will have to pass close by before he comes here.”

“Are you having the residents take refuge?”

“There are reports that they have fled to the nearby woods, but I wish to make sure.”

In Alsace, there were four villages in addition to the town of Celesta; however, the other three were far from Thenardier's path. Still, since there was no news of it being damaged, it was unnecessary for Tigre to check it immediately.

--- Though it is not as if I do not understand his feelings...

Though she understood, Lim could not help but feel irritated. They did not have the time for such leisurely activities since they would be fighting Thenardier's Army from now on.

--- Also...

Tigre's tone and expression were lacking. This brought Lim's emotions in a negative direction.

“Your maid will be accompanying you?”

Lim asked him because the saddle placed on the horse was large, and Teita was not wearing her maid's dress but thick, hempen clothing.

“Teita will feel anxious if I'm away from the mansion for too long.”

--- I do not think he is getting cold feet. The bow in his saddle is not the black bow but his normal one.

Tigre tried to run from the Imperial Palace to save the people in his territory at the risk of his own life. It is one of the few things Lim evaluated him highly on.

“I see. Before you return, I would like to examine the records and documents related to Alsace. Will that be fine with you?”

Putting his motive asides, Lim asked him for permission. Still, while her voice was empty, it contained a few thorns.

“I understand. They're in my room and the study. To get there, you---”

While explaining the location to Lim, Tigre turned to Teita who consented. Though dissatisfied, Teita handed the key to the residence to Lim.

“Um...”

“Do not worry. I will not touch anything other than the documents and records as promised.”

Lim relaxed her face and slightly smiled at Teita. After she bowed, she ran to Tigre in a panic.

“We're off.”

Lim saw Tigre and Teita off as they rode out of town on the horse, seeing Teita snuggle up closely against him, before entering his residence.

The roads laid within Alsace were not good.

The weeds ran rampant, the soil was not flat, and the fence put up near the forests was in poor condition.

Teita, behind Tigre, rode sidesaddle. Though she wanted to hold on to Tigre, she gripped the saddle with both hands so as not to be a hindrance.

Since the horse was carrying two people as well as supplies, it was not very quick, and since she trusted Tigre's equestrian skills, Teita rode in comfort.

--- It was a little unreasonable, but I'm glad I asked him for this.

When Tigre said he would head to Hunawihr, Teita insisted that she go with him. Though Tigre was confused, he eventually gave up due to exhaustion.

There were two reasons she wanted to go.

One was to be close to Tigre.

After Tigre left for Dinant, Teita had spent many days and nights alone. Her anxiety was severe, especially after learning of the defeat of the Brune Army. During that time, she went to the temple and prayed on a regular basis.

Everything happened in an instant.

Tigre headed for the battlefield with the Zhcted Army. When she thought it possible to meet him again at last, they had become busy with reconstruction of the town, so they did not have time to speak.

She felt Tigre's warmth as she leaned against his back.

“Tigre-sama.”

“What is it?”

“I don't know what you are thinking, or what will happen in the future, but I will follow Tigre-sama everywhere.”

Teita had noticed Tigre's gloomy appearance since early that morning. That was another reason she followed after him.

--- If it were the usual Tigre-sama, he would say today is a good day for hunting. His expression hasn't changed at all, and he went upstairs immediately after breakfast. It must be something difficult to say to me.

Teita did not understand what Tigre worried about. Even if she knew, as a simple maid, she could not do anything to help him.

Still, Teita wanted to be with Tigre.

No matter what, Teita would be his ally.

"--- Thank you, Teita."

The words he returned were full of emotions. Teita was glad the usual Tigre had returned.

Hunawihr was a small village with fewer than two hundred inhabitants.

The forests spread out in the nearby vicinity, and the residents often entered it. As a child, he had played in the forest, and when older, he gathered firewood, nuts, and mushrooms.

Though there were wolves and wild boars in the vicinity, they would rarely attack a group of people so long as their territory was not trespassed. It was a peaceful village.

One koku had passed after midday by the time Tigre and Teita arrived at the village. They took some time to rest and have a meal so they would have the energy to complete their task before the sun set.

When farmers who cultivated the field saw Tigre, they ran up with short steps. Tigre pulled his horse to a stop and helped Teita after dismounting.

“Everyone, are you safe?”

“Yes, Lord, thanks to you.”

A middle-aged man had his hand on his head and smiled. The other farmers, as well, followed suit.

“We hid in the forests like you said. They passed by quickly.”

“Really, there were many people running away two days ago, Lord.”

Tigre heard the farmers' stories one by one before separating from them. He headed to the village chief's while pulling his horse along.

Soon, he saw the village chief who was cultivating the fields, just like the other farmers.

The man was in his mid-forties. His figure was like a barrel and his arms and legs were stout. His skin was tanned and his face was red due to sunburn from spending his time working the fields.

When he noticed Tigre, he walked out of the field.

“Did you come to help with the fields, Lord?”

“Though I can help, won't you just do it all over again?”

The village chief feigned ignorance as Tigre laughed and shrugged his shoulders. In all actuality, Tigre had gripped the hoe only once the last time he tried to help, so his work was terrible.

“Haha, excuse me.”

The village chief laughed, his belly shaking, and smiled at Teita. Tigre asked about the damage to the village.

“It's as you see. The fences around the village were destroyed, but we have no injured or dead.

After saying that, the village chief looked serious.

“By the way, I heard a rumor that the Zhcted Army has come...”

“They are allies who I have employed. Don't worry about it.”

The village chief looked relieved and laughed after seeing Tigre's confident attitude.

The village chief wanted to celebrate his victory in Molsheim, even if the party would be small. Though he offered a seat to Tigre, Tigre refused since it would take place early tomorrow.

At dawn, Tigre said his farewell to the chief and headed to Celesta on horseback.

Teita did not think he looked well, and, out of consideration, spoke up.

“Tigre-sama. Will you be taking a nap on the way?”

Tigre's legs loosened from around the horse as he heard the unexpected words.

“It's unusual you would say this. Did you not sleep well, Teita?”

“I am still a bit tired...”

Teita answered modestly. Tigre smiled wryly, but he did not reject her. He felt it would soon be time to take a break, regardless.

The sun shined brightly in the blue heavens. The fine weather was no different from yesterday's.

“I wonder if I can trouble them. If I remember, there should be a hut nearby.”

Tigre left the road and headed toward a small hut at the top of a hill. It was built from logs, and Tigre had used it numerous times before.

He dismounted and saw no one inside.

In the middle was a plate full of ash. It was used to build a fire, but, from its current state, it had not been used for the past several days.

He tethered the horse outdoors, wiped its body down, and gave it water to drink. Teita helped him as well.

After finishing, the two entered the hut. Teita lay on the floor.

“Teita, you should get some rest. I'm sure it's tiresome riding the horse all the time.”

“If I do not stay up, who will wake you up, Tigre-sama ?”

Tigre scratched his head upon hearing her joke.

“I got it, but don't do anything unreasonable.”

He spoke gently and closed his eyes.

Perhaps fatigued by constantly thinking to himself, Tigre fell asleep immediately.

There was a ten year old girl before his eyes.

“--- Tigre-sama.”

She spoke with a lisp and had chestnut-brown hair tied on the left and right side of her head. Teita's hazel eyes shined brilliantly.

“Tigre-sama, over here.”

Teita laughed innocently as she walked along, gripping Tigre's hand. Tigre quietly followed after her.

Seeing his hands, Tigre realized it was a dream. He was the same age when he met Teita.

The boy and girl walked along the narrow road as fields stretched along both sides.

Before he noticed, Tigre stood before a certain field.

“Tigrevurmud.”

One man walked there. It was his father, Urz Vorn, who had died two years ago.

“Come, let's plow.”

Tigre's father passed him a hoe.

--- Now that I remember, this happened before.

Tigre's thoughts were hazy as he held the hoe.

He was probably 10 years old at the time. His father was inspecting the village. It was the one time he had been given a hoe.

Though he thought he could do it, his entire body hurt after only a quarter koku. The next day, there were many bean-like injuries on his hands. Teita took a handful of bandages and treated him.

Having held the hoe, his range of vision had changed drastically.

Tigre stood on top of a hill alongside his father.

Before his eyes, green grape fields extended as far as his eye could see.

"Tigrevurmud."

The father spoke gently to his son.

"They cultivate the fields every day. They scatter the seeds, water the plants, and drive away the insects and birds, and scare away the hares and wild boars that come

to the village. They worry about droughts and fear storms. After harvesting the fields and cleaning them up, they repeat the process again."

As a hunter, I am the same. Tigre answered in that way. Just before, he had caught a large deer.

"Your skill with the bow is splendid, especially for your age; however, it is different from hunters. We do not hunt to live."

Tigre nodded strongly because he did not understand what it meant to live.

"Everyone works the fields to live. Do you understand why it is that you do not do this?"

Because of you, Dad. Because I am the Lord's son. This time, Tigre answered firmly. He could not help but blush in embarrassment when recalling the memory. His father was not angry with his response.

"Then why do I not need to cultivate the fields?"

Because you are great. When he said that, his father slowly shook his head.

"Listen, Tigrevurmud. We are here in case there is an emergency."

"Emergency?"

"That's right. We're there for situations which are difficult to solve. Landslides, floods, bandits, epidemics, poor harvests, disputes amongst villages, clashes with neighboring aristocrats over the rivers and mountains, there are many other things... I am there to try and resolve those problems. Our work is to ensure they live their lives in peace."

"But why do you have to..."

Again, his father shook his head slowly.

"The more people there are, the more trouble that appears. Though Alsace may be small and peaceful..."

At that time, his words stopped. Tigre's father placed his hand on Tigre's head. Even in the dream, Tigre could feel the weight and warmth of his hand.

"Do not forget, Tigrevurmud. This is the Lord's duty."

The feeling of the hand disappeared. His father walked away quietly. While watching his back, Tigre could not walk. Even if he tried to chase after his father, his feet would not move.

"Dad... Dad – Father."

Then he awoke. He saw the ceiling of the hut and heard the cry of birds outside.

--- Father...

How long has it been since I've dreamed of father?

He tried to sit up, but felt a weight and faint heat on his body. Tigre looked down.

Teita was clinging to him, calmly breathing as she slept. Though it surprised him, Tigre quickly regained his composure.

--- Did you bring me to meet my father?

In the dream, it was the young Teita that took him to his father. Warmth welled from within his chest. Tigre hugged her gently.

After a while, Teita woke up.

She let out a noise as she looked up at Tigre, half-asleep. Her eyes were unfocused.

Teita stood up in a panic as soon as she understood the situation. She waved her hands about, and her face was red. She made many incoherent excuses.

“Ti, Tigre-sama, it's something different. Ah, um... I didn't want to take too much space in case someone entered...”



Tigre smiled wryly as he saw Teita's panic as he thought about his emotions.

Having recalled his father, he was engrossed in sentimental feelings and closely embraced her. In the summer atmosphere in a dim hut, Teita's reaction calmed Tigre down.

“Teita.”

Hearing Tigre call out to her in a calm voice, Teita began to settle down.

“Thank you. I owe you one. It was quite refreshing.”

Seeing Tigre look as though he were about to laugh, she was relieved the shadow in his face had disappeared. After borrowing the LeitMeritz soldiers from Ellen, he had pushed the Thenardier Army back and had not gotten any rest.

Anxiety and fear entered the gap it opened in his heart .

--- I can’t stop now.

There were many things Tigre had to do.

He had borrowed the strength of the LeitMeritz Army to fight Thenardier's troops.

Though he was anxious about the power of his black bow, he lacked enough clues to find any more information on it. For now, he would put it aside.

“Let's go, Teita.”

Tigre stepped out of the hut refreshed. He looked at the cloudless sky.

--- If nothing else, at least the weather is good for hunting.

“Tigre-sama.”

From behind, Teita spoke in an angry tone.

“Are you thinking of hunting right now?”

“... How did you know?”

“I know. How many years do you think I have been serving you?”

After answering, Teita smiled happily. Realizing she was joking just a moment ago, Tigre smiled bitterly as he helped her mount the horse.

While riding, Tigre called back to Teita.

“Teita. We'll be busy when we get back to Celesta. Our situation is a bit problematic, so I want you to go to Lord Massas' place for a while---”

“Tigre-sama.”

Teita hugged Tigre from behind.

“I said it yesterday. I will follow you everywhere. You have helped me. It is my turn to help you now.”

Tigre gently placed his hands on Teita's.

Her words were happy, though there was sadness in them. While he was busy worrying, she had long since determined her course of action.

Tigre let go of Teita's hands and kicked the horse's belly.

“Hold on tight.”

As if reflecting his heart, the horse fiercely sped up.

The faint warmth and weight of the girl on his back comforted him.

Tigre and Teita arrived at Celesta a half koku faster than scheduled.

Once they returned to the mansion, they noticed a horse in the stable that did not belong to Tigre.

They had often seen this horse; it was white with a black mane which ran down its body.

“This horse is Massas-sama's...?”

“Yeah, no doubt.”

Tigre responded to Teita's surprised voice.

“Teita, can I leave this to you?”

“Yes.” Teita nodded and smiled brilliantly. Tigre ran out of the stables and impatiently opened the doors to his house, ignoring the mud on his leather shoes.

He first went to the dining room but found no one there. When he opened the door to the drawing room, he saw Massas Rodant sitting in place.

Tigre swallowed his voice as he tried to call out the man's name. The room was wrapped in a dangerous atmosphere which would likely make children cry.

Massas and Lim were staring at each other across a small table.

--- Did they not notice me...?

He closed the door and returned to the stable. He asked Teita what was for dinner. He thought it was the best course of action.

"--- So you're back, Tigre."

Massas turned his head to look at Tigre. His short stature and stout body was wrapped in clothes with muted clothing. His gray beard gave off a dignity fitting for his age.

“You're safe, above all else... I wanted to hear what happened from you. When I came, I saw a woman who was neither Teita nor Paula in the house. Isn't this quite a surprise?”

Paula was a housewife in her 50s who lived in the area . She worked as a maid for Tigre's father, Urz, when he was still alive, and she came to help when times were busy.

Though Massas continued speaking with the good-natured smile the elderly might have, his eyes were not laughing at all.

“And now we have a deputy from Zhcted in Alsace. By all means, please tell me the entire story.”

Tigre looked with his eyes toward Lim. She silently sat with her usual expressionless face.

The moving reunion he imagined in his head was nowhere to be found.

Thenardier saw as his army had barely arrived in Nemetacum having barely escaped Alsace. The punishment was severe.

Those who were guarding Zaien, the son and heir of the household, and those assisting him in commanding the soldiers were punished with floggings. The ones who whipped them were the bereaved families of soldiers who died in battle.

The whip was intended for use with torture. At each of the ten straps were thorns. The skin tore whenever they hit the back, and the flesh was scooped away. Blood sprayed about with increasing frequency. Since they would be whipped more if they screamed, they clenched their teeth and endured the pain.

The other soldiers were hit hard in the back with a heated iron rod.

Duke Thenardier watched the scene in silence as he poured wine into a silver chalice. Though expressionless,

it was clear to anyone who saw that he was angry from the bottom of his heart.

--- Zaien was an unreliable fool for his age.

Even so, he was still an important son.

Zaien led an army and lost a duel against Tigre. Zaien's corpse sank into a marsh in the Molsheim Plains.

--- That damn brat... Zhcted...!

Should the situation permit it, he would lead the army himself to invade Alsace and take Tigre's life.

The Duke was 42 this year. His large body was tight and forged, and his skill with the sword, spear, and horse was on par with, if not superior to, a Knight's. His distinguished services on the battlefield were many in number, as well.

Though he had withdrawn from the front lines, he still continued training.

When the punishment ended, he walked indignantly down the corridors of his grand mansion. The Duke returned to his private room on his own.

Though he had emptied four bottles of wine, he was not drunk. He was filled with a murderous intent; the pressure alone could suffocate those nearby.

Though the Duke's room was not fancy in appearance, any who saw it would be reluctant to enter due to the tension.

The carpet was finely embroidered, and the desk was made of ebony. The candlestick was made of gold, and all the accessories were made of silver or gold.

However, the Duke walked violently into the room and dragged the chair from the desk before sitting.

He grasped a bottle of liquor from Asvarre on his desk and poured a glass before drinking it in a flash.

"--- You seem out of sorts."

Thenardier glared at the unexpected voice.

A short old man in a black robe stood in front of the open door. He wore a hood over his eyes, covering his face.

"Drekavac."

The Duke nearly spat out the liquor in his mouth and almost knocked the empty bottle over. The old man bowed as he held back his laughter.

Drekavac had served the Thenardier family as a soothsayer for many years.

In this residence, no, even throughout all of Brune, the old man was the only one permitted to speak insolently to Thenardier. If a servant had done the same thing, he and his family would likely be executed within the same day.

“I believe you have heard the stories.”

“Zaien-sama has died. You have my condolences from the bottom of my heart---”

“There is no need to say it. I don't expect such things from you.”

Thenardier interrupted Drekavac's words and stared at the elderly person's face beneath the hood.

“I am grateful; however, you are far too lenient in your punishment, Your Excellency.”

"It is regrettable, but I need the soldiers now. I cannot just kill them as I please."

In fact, he had lost two thousand soldiers and two Dragons. It was an unexpected blow. An unknown aristocrat in a remote place should not have been able to do that.

However, it appears Tigrevurmud Vorn appeared with the Zhcted Army and killed Zaien and both Dragons, and three thousand of his men had scattered.

"Ignoring the soldiers colliding against one another... Was it the boy from Alsace or the Vanadis from Zhcted that killed the dragon?"

Catching Thenardier's fierce eyes, Drekavac slowly nodded.

"I should first inform you. The seven Vanadis from Zhcted possess a weapon known as a Dragonic Viralt Tool."

"... I have only heard of its name. Is this Dragonic Tool truly so powerful?"

"There is nothing that can compare. It can cut through a soldier with ease and has a special power which allows it to crush a Dragon."

Though the Dragons truly were killed, Thenardier would simply laugh those words off if they came from anyone other than Drekavac.

"What is the weapon made of?"

"It is not made of anything found in the earth."

Thenardier's black beard trembled hearing Drekavac's response.

"I see. So it can easily cut through a Dragon's scales which can easily fend away steel."

"It is such a weapon."

Thenardier simply believed those words which normally would seem like a joke.

"I understand. Can you prepare new Dragons?"

"I can finish it by the new year, though I will need some money."

Drekavac bowed as Thenardier agreed. Though he thought to ask whether it could be done sooner, he understood it would not be possible any sooner due to their long association.

Thenardier picked up a bright silver bell on his desk and rang it.

He ordered his attendant to quickly prepare a bag the size of a human head to be filled with gold.

"By the way, what of Earl Vorn and the Vanadis?"

"I will take care of it. Please hurry with the Dragons."

The Duke waved his thick hand as Drekavac soundlessly disappeared. When the door closed, the Duke tapped his temple with his finger. He was finally feeling the effects of the alcohol.

"... It can't be helped."

Thenardier muttered bitterly. He wanted to kill Tigre with his own hand, but he had only one body and could not prepare an infinite number of soldiers.

"Though it may seem like using an axe to slaughter an insect, perhaps I will use the [Seven Chains]. Also---"

Serasyu

He rung the bell again, summoning a second servant. He quickly gave orders and then quickly drank a cup of water.

"Use a Knight for a Knight, a Dragon for a Dragon... and a Vanadis for a Vanadis. I suppose I could use that connection."

While looking at his reflection in his silver chalice, Thenardier slowly muttered to himself.

"Speaking of which, I believe Ganelon also has an association with one of the Vanadis of Zhcted. I wonder what that man is up to..."

The Two Vanadis

Tigre brought a chair from another room specifically to sit next to Massas. He hesitated to sit next to Lim.

“The seat next to mine is vacant.”

Lim turned her gaze coldly toward him. She was sitting on a sofa spacious enough for two adults to be seated. Of course, her remark was not one made from good will.

“--- Tigre.”

Leaning on the couch with his arms folded, Massas glared at Lim.

“I'm quite glad you're safe. There's been quite a lot piling up that I've wanted to talk to you about since Dinant, but I've been quite anxious since I met this little Miss... I thought something bad may have happened to you.”

Tigre wanted to bury his hands in his head. In the future, their help would be indispensable. He had been worrying about what to say even before this moment.

While thinking about what to say first, light footsteps mixed with humming approached. Teita opened the door and looked inside.

“Massas-sama! You came!”

“Oh, Teita. It seems you're safe.”

Massas smiled from ear to ear upon seeing the maid with chestnut-brown hair. If Tigre was something like a son to the old Knight, Teita would be like his daughter. Though he had his own children, he still felt a strong affection for the two.

“Everyone, let's have some tea.”

Without forgetting about Lim, Teita held the edge of her skirt and bowed before politely leaving the room. The intense atmosphere had finally calmed down, granting Tigre some time to relax.

“Lord Massas, allow me to explain the situation first. Lim... Limlisha, if you feel the need to give more information, please do so.”

Tigre described what happened to him after he met Ellen in Dinant. Massas listened silently and nodded,

while Lim occasionally looked to Tigre without saying anything.

When he finished speaking, Teita arrived with tea for three.

Tigre took a drink to quench his parched throat and thanked Teita.

For a while, Massas gazed at the tea in his cup. When Teita left the room, he looked up toward Lim.

He placed his hands on his knees and bowed deeply.

“Limlisha, First, I apologize for doubting your words.”

“It could not be helped. I will apologize as well for not greeting you properly.”

“Before I got back, what on earth happened?”

Tigre was finally able to ask about what happened between the two.

“Lord Massas arrived while I was inspecting the documents in this room.”

"I will admit, I was lacking in composure. I saw the Black Dragon (Zirnitra) Flag of Zhcted waving in the town. I came to your mansion to visit you, and instead, I found the commander of the Zhcted Army. I didn't see Teita here, either."

"... I apologize for the trouble."

Tigre could do nothing but apologize.

He had not forgotten Massas, but he did not think he would come to visit.

"By the way, Limlisha, there was something I wanted to ask you."

While stroking his gray beard, Massas turned his dark eyes toward Lim.

"Why did you... no, why did the Lord you serve, the Vanadis Eleanora Viltaria, decide to help Tigre?"

"Eleanora-sama respects his righteousness, and she is a soft-hearted person."

Tigre mentally inclined his head, though he remained silent because he could not deny her words.

"However, is that really enough to make a move?"

"She also respects the contract under the name of Radegast."

Radegast was a God of Contract common to the faith of Zhcted and Brune. A promise bearing his name was a very heavy thing.

"Though Lord Tigrevurmud had become Eleanora-sama's captive, he is also Earl Vorn, Lord of Alsace. In accordance to the contract, he will have our cooperation and will repay us with this territory."

"I see. However, the land of Alsace is primarily under Tigre's charge, but it was not his originally. The King of Brune granted his family the territory under the contract that they would protect the citizens of Brune; however, he has no rights to business. I believe the Vanadis understands this."

Massas was implicitly asking if she was going to make a deal with Brune as a whole.

"If that is the case, then we will simply negotiate with the King of Brune."

"... So, until that time, you will help Tigre... Earl Vorn?"

Massas asked to confirm their intent, and Lim simply nodded while giving it some thought in her mind.

--- I should see how committed he is.

"That is our intention."

Lim had thought he would be unwilling to fight. She wanted to hear Tigre's thoughts while Massas was present.

"Of course, that depends on Lord Tigrevurmud's behavior. Should Eleanora-sama deem his justice unworthy... we will simply move back across the Vosyes Mountains."

"I'll do my best."

Hearing Tigre's short response and seeing him shrug his shoulders, Lim scrutinized him carefully.

Though she did not know what caused such a rapid change, she saw an adamant will within his eyes.

--- I don't know what happened in these past two days...

Lim was relieved. Her role was to assist Tigre, but if Tigre did not move forward on his own, she would be useless.

"By the way, Lord Massas. I would like to hear, no, please, teach me. What has become of Duke Ganelon's soldiers? How did you stop them?"

Duke Ganelon had also moved his soldiers, but he did not attack Alsace.

In the letter Massas gave to Batran, which alerted them of the attack by Duke Thenardier, Massas said he would deal with Duke Ganelon's men.

"Hm, about that..."

Massas stroked his gray beard.

"If I were to say anything, I would say I was lucky. I was barely able to buy time."

Duke Ganelon had amassed two thousand troops in his territory, Lutetia, three days before Duke Thenardier did.

The distance to Alsace was not very different between the two. If the Ganelon Army began marching, they would have invaded Alsace before Thenardier's Army, and everything would have gone smoothly.

The first thing Massas did to stop Ganelon's Army was to appeal to the neighboring aristocrats. Though they were similar weak aristocrats who desired neutrality above all else, he would not give up. To prevent the movements of the army, he had to call on such people.

He continued running to various places, summoning the nobles, since he knew it would help Tigre.

He had managed to gather four people. Massas wished to gather more, but he could not with the limited time. The five people, including himself, came in contact with the Ganelon Army.

They prepared alcohol and meals for two thousand soldiers and entertained them. They did all this so they could request a meeting with the commander as a neutral party.

"The Ganelon Army will stop marching, and we will relay your message. Though, as you may expect, we will likely only delay our movements."

Tigre felt suspicious upon seeing Massas' gloomy expression.

"Did something bad happen?"

"They were searching for information on the nearby aristocrats and released many scouts... I think the Ganelon Army used us as an excuse when they had intended to stop already."

Massas shook his head as his stout body cringed.

"You think they had a reason not to attack Alsace?"

"I'm not exactly sure. They stopped moving after hearing Thenardier had prepared three thousand men and two Dragons."

After finishing his words, Massas looked at Tigre and Lim skeptically.

"Tigre. Is it true the Zhcted Army killed the two Dragons? Even living for more than fifty years, and I have never seen a Dragon. No, I did see a young Dragon when I was training in a rural village."

"It is true."

Tigre confirmed it after exchanging a glance with Lim.

"The Vanadis, Eleanora-sama slayed both."

Massas frowned and groaned several times. He let out a large breath soon enough.

"If it is as you say, then I will not ask any further. As soon as the Ganelon Army learned of the existence of the Dragons, they made preparations to withdraw. They left before Duke Thenardier's defeat was made public. Perhaps they simply postponed their attack."

Massas quickly drank the rest of the tea after he finished speaking.

"Now, Tigre. What will you be doing from now on?"

"I will fight Duke Thenardier."

Massas had asked in a solemn tone, but Tigre answered immediately without any sign of doubt in his eyes.

“Do you mean to join Duke Ganelon?”

“No. I do not intend to.”

Ganelon was no different, since he was attempting to attack Alsace as well.

It would be impossible for him to work with either.

“... So this is the conclusion you have reached after giving it thought?”

Massas gazed at Tigre, leaning his entire body forward . Tigre looked him straight on without flinching and nodded.

“Honestly speaking, it's frightening and I'd rather run away. After all, they're the top two aristocrats, and I'm just a small noble at the borders of the country. What can I do? Even so---”

Tigre put strength in his voice and continued.

"I have succeeded Alsace from my Father, and I have an obligation to defend the people who live in this land. Even if I had no obligation, I would still desire to defend them. To protect them in moments of peril is my duty as Lord."

"Tigre..."

Massas silently watched the youth with red hair. He watched the son of his best friend.

"This road will be steep, more so than you might think . Duke Thenardier will not let you go for killing his son, and you brought the troops of Zhcted into our lands. There will be many who criticize you and very few who will approve of your actions."

It was not a threat but a fact.

"Though I hesitate to say this before Limlisha, but the Zhcted Army is also fighting for their own convenience. Even then, will you ally yourself with Zhcted and fight?"

"You really aren't being optimistic at all."

Tigre smiled and answered frankly.

"Well, I'll manage somehow."

Massas nearly cried out indignantly hearing Tigre's bad habit of saying those words.

However, he noticed Tigre's eyes were full of sincerity. Instead, the old man swallowed his words and let out a sigh.

"You need to say it more firmly."

The sun had fallen.

Teita brought more tea as they took a break before resuming their conversation. The setting sun shined through the window, forming a delicate shadow in the room.

"There are two possibilities I can think of at the moment. One is to send a letter to His Majesty, the King."

He would write that Alsace was unlawfully attacked by Duke Thenardier. In order to stop them, he borrowed the strength of the Zhcted Army.

"Since it might be effective, should we do it?"

Lim's blue eyes looked doubtful.

“I am unsure of how effective this would be. He might not do anything to protect the status quo. Also, if he did something about Duke Thenardier, Duke Ganelon might use the opportunity to attack. What is the other option?”

“Search for allies.”

Though Ellen and the Zhcted Army were strong, they would still push away many potential allies as Lim stated before.

“For now, we're a bit light.”

Though Massas smiled bitterly, and Tigre spoke seriously.

“Lord Massas. How is the situation in Brune now? What of the fight between Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon?”

“Hm. Right...”

Massas cast his gaze to Lim.

"Should I wait outside until you have finished your business?"

She did not particularly show any dissatisfaction as she began to stand.

"No, you need to be here."

Tigre shook his head and turned his gaze to Massas.

"Lord Massas, she is my ally. If you are willing to speak to me, then she may stay as well."

Lim raised her own concern at that time.

"I am not Eleanora-sama. You have no reason to trust me."

"Ellen trusts you. Isn't that why she left you here? If so , then I trust you as well. Also, there are many things I don't know that you do."

A small smile appeared on Tigre's face as he gave her an answer. Lim, whose expression remained unfriendly, felt a mixture of guilt and embarrassment.

"... If you are willing to go that far, then I shall remain as Eleanora-sama's representative."

With a sigh, Lim sat back on the sofa. After looking at Tigre and Lim, Massas placed a thick finger on the table and resumed the conversation.

"Tigre. Like I said before, everyone in Brune is waiting for the upcoming civil war. There are also those afraid of what might be happening in the neighboring countries... Zhcted, Muozinel, Sachstein, and Asvarre. They are also paying close attention."

"So there are no powers other than Thenardier and Ganelon in the country? In other words, there are some who are still unaffiliated..."

This was the information Tigre wanted more than anything else.

"That's true."

Massas brought his hand to his chest as he nodded. He pulled out several coins of silver and copper.

"When it comes to the power in this country... Let's say it amounts to one hundred in total. Dukes Thenardier

and Ganelon would amount to forty... no, thirty each. You belong to the remaining forty."

He placed two large silver coins on the table.

"If that's the case, there's room for opposition."

Lim looked doubtful as she spoke. Massas simply shook his head.

"Within that forty, thirty would be taken by the various Knighthoods in the country. They unite to defend the borders and the capitals. The remaining nobles would only represent the remaining ten."

Massas stacked numerous copper coins on the table.

Though numerous, they looked weak in comparison to the silver coins which brilliantly reflected the sunlight coming in from the window.

"However, Tigre, your situation is different from the other nobles."

The atmosphere became serious as Massas placed a small silver coin on the table.

"You have the Vanadis of Zhcted as an ally. Though you shouldn't rely on them too much, if you do things well, you can bring the remaining aristocrats to your side . If you ignore the Knights who will remain neutral, you could become a third force."

"That's... somewhat amazing."

Seeing the many silver and copper coins on the table, Tigre swallowed his saliva. If he could manage to do this, he might be able to fight evenly with Duke Thenardier.

"In the end, that is only if you can do this."

Lim pierced through him with cold words.

"In the first place, Lord Tigrevurmud is a rebel who sold his territory to our country. It is only a matter of time before a punitive force is organized to subjugate him."

"It will not come immediately."

Massas denied her words. Lim gazed at him expecting an explanation.

"Limlisha, what would you do against a force that defeated three thousand soldiers and two Dragons?"

Lim had a tendency to look downward while she thought about something. After asking, Massas continued to speak.

"If they brought the same number, they may lose again. They would need to prepare at least six thousand men, and that would take time. Even if they recruited soldiers from the neighboring aristocrats, there are not many who would want to join."

"... Also, Lord Tigrevurmud is not their only opponent . So that is what you meant."

Lim nodded in consent. Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon recognized each other as their largest enemy.

"However, we do not have the time to relax."

After staring at the silver coins on the table, Tigre collected his thoughts.

Their resources were vastly different. In the time Tigre could organize three hundred soldiers, Thenardier would gather ten thousand.

“Tigre. You mentioned it before, but who will you send to bring your letter to His Majesty?”

“I have not made the decision yet.”

Thinking about the current situation, it would be dangerous to head to the King's Capital. There was the possibility Duke Thenardier would obstruct his actions, as well, and it was a task he did not intend to leave to others.

“I will take it.”

Massas spoke with a light-hearted tone, surprising Tigre.

“Wa, wait. I can't ask you to do this, Lord Massas...”

“What now? You're leading the army of another country. Besides, unlike you, I have several

acquaintances working in the Royal Palace. It should be much easier for me to gain an audience with His Majesty. ”

Though Tigre hesitated, Massas was, without a doubt, the most qualified person. After worrying for a while, he bowed deeply.

“... In that case, thank you very much. I will prepare the letter by tomorrow morning.”

Massas nodded, his thick body swaying.

“By the way, Tigre. Do you know Viscount Hugues Augre?”

Tigre searched through his memories having abruptly heard the name. He recalled hearing it long ago.

“If I remember... He governs Territoire. Father brought me to greet him when I was small.”

“Augre is currently neutral, and he has many acquaintances. I'll write a letter of introduction, so you should go meet him.”

Tigre could not hold back his emotions. He leaned forward and grasped Massas' hands tightly.

"... Thank you, Lord Massas!"

"Honestly. You're before a woman. Can't you act more gallantly?"

Massas smiled wryly and looked at Tigre calmly. He gently tapped the young man's shoulder.

"Don't worry about me, Tigre. I'm glad to be of use."

When Tigre had become a captive in Zhcted, Massas could not do anything, no matter what efforts he made. He felt how powerless he was and regretted it deeply. He had continued to apologize to Tigre's deceased father, Urz.

"Limlisha, do you have any questions?"

With Massas' question, Lim turned her blue eyes to Tigre.

"Lord Tigrevurmud, I wish to know the reason you are fighting Duke Thenardier. I want something concrete.

For example, do you wish to destroy the entire household?"

Massas stared wide-eyed at this radical question, while Tigre simply shook his head in denial.

"My purpose is the peace of Alsace. It is fine if Duke Thenardier would swear never to lay a hand on it... is what I would like to say."

Tigre played with his dull red hair after saying those words.

However, even if he was embarrassed, he was not troubled. He had made his decision and had the resolution to follow through with it.

"I can't really ask people to work for me without pay, so I will likely end up demanding money or territory."

After the conversation had finished, and Lim left the room. The sun had almost sunk below the horizon.

She was glad that Tigre had made his resolve.

--- Perhaps it's his character. Though lacking in some areas, I just have to assist him.

Still, she was relieved. When Lim noticed her feelings, she understood she was happy because it would be more convenient for Ellen.

Though Lim intended to leave the house, she headed to the dining room while deep in thought. Teita was bustling about the kitchen in preparation for dinner, setting the tableware down.

"... Did you need something?"

Teita noticed Lim and walked over cautiously.

"I have a favor to ask of you."

Lim abruptly lifted her arm and pointed to a small doll hung along the wall. It was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand; it was a bear doll.

"If you do not mind, may I have that? Um... I have a friend who loves them."

As Lim had said to Teita before, she had not set foot in any room other than Tigre's room and the study; however, when she passed by the dining room, she noticed the doll and had been anxious since then.

The latter half of Lim's words were spoken in an unnatural tone, though Teita had not noticed. Her lovely face frowned as she looked up at Lim.

“But isn't it quite dirty?”

“I do not mind.”

Teita looked at Lim and the doll with a perplexed expression.

It was a doll Teita made a year ago to decorate the empty wall.

“If you want, I can make you the same thing by the end of tomorrow.”

Lim leaned forward swiftly while remaining impassive before Teita could finish speaking. Teita nearly let out a cry in surprise.

"Is it really okay?"

"Y, yes..."

"Please, by all means."

Though Lim had an expressionless face, she was desperately suppressing her joy which clearly showed in her eyes. For Teita, it was something she could make normally, but it was a rare item for Lim.

After saying she would return the next day to pick it up, Lim left the house in good spirits.

The Royal Capital of Silesia was located near the center of Zhcted Kingdom.

More than one million people lived in the capital. To the north was the large Valta River which passed into the sea. Products from various countries also passed through the numerous roads entering the city.

Carriages held items full of bamboo from the east, furs and and oils from nomadic peoples, and spices, pottery, tea, and silver ornaments from Muozinel to the south.

The caravans from the west held wheat, wine, and minerals from Brune and Sachstein. Fleets which moved along the Valta River brought fish and pearls caught in the seas near Asvarre. There were even fishes larger than an adult.

There were also domestic goods, such as wool, jewels, and spices from the seven Dukedoms. In return for defending Zhcted, the local farmers also brought fresh fruits, vegetables, and egg products to be sold.

In select taverns throughout the city, Zhcted minstrels could be heard strumming their shamisen harps. Jesters from Brune and dancers from Zhcted could also be found entertaining the people, and beautiful women served guests alcohol.

Befitting the Royal Capital, Silesia, even at night, was full of light and energy.

"It's lively as usual."

Ellen walked through on her horse happily as she looked about. She was dressed in a natural leather armor and a hempen cloak like a humble traveler.

Because Arifal stood out, it was wrapped in cloth and set on her waist. The Dragonic (Viralt) Tool was dissatisfied, and, occasionally, the cloth could be seen swelling as it wrapped itself in wind.

"Goodness. I'd like to buy some fruit and look at some of the entertainment."

Still, she had not gone to the capital for such a reason. There was no telling who was watching her or from where. Eventually, she arrived at the Palace and took the appropriate posture. When the soldiers saw her, they bowed reverently.

"Eleanora Viltaria-sama. Please allow us to see your Dragonic Tool."

"You knew it was me immediately."

"We are working hard to keep the Palace safe."

Ellen removed the cloth wrapped about Arifal as they looked at her in admiration. The longsword, happy to be freed, let out a wind that tickled her argent hair.

"Are there other Vanadis here?"

"Ludmira Lurie-sama and Sophia Obertas-sama have arrived."

Ellen returned the Silver Flash to her waist and passed beneath the gate to the Royal Palace. Her expression was subtle.

--- Sophia aside, Ludmira's here...

She did not get along well with Ludmira. To be more precise, they had a poor relationship.

"Well, that's fine. I'll take care of the troublesome business first."

Ellen walked between the people of the Royal Palace. Her argent hair was decorated, and she was wrapped in a silver-white dress.

Her shoulders were out in the open, boldly exposing her back and her bosom. Her sleeves and the hem of her dress were finely decorated. Though bright, it left a clean impression.

Though Silver Flash Arifal was conspicuously held in her left hand, it did not ruin the beauty of the Vanadis; rather, it gave her a strength to offset her appearance.

The court officials sitting in the rows sighed, overwhelmed by her beautiful face and gallant behavior.

Usually, when having an audience with the King, it is not permissible to carry a weapon. The only exception was a Vanadis and her Dragonic Tool.

Ellen quietly walked down the crimson carpet to the throne before stopping her feet and kneeling. She placed Arifal on the floor before her and hung her head.

"You may raise your face."

A dry voice, like a withered tree, came from the throne above. It was the voice of the King of Zhcted, Victor.

According to Ellen's memory, the King was 60 this year. His gray hair and beard were carefully maintained, his skin was darkening, and his blue eyes were lacking in vitality. Though he sat with his spine upright, the hands extending from his clothing, which were nothing but skin and bones, were relaxed.

"... Master of the Koma no Zanki [Brilliant Beheader of the Fallen Spirit], Eleanora Viltaria. I have heard you have moved your army into Brune without receiving prior permission."

"It is as His Majesty says."

"For what reason have you done this? You may receive a suitable punishment for thoughtless behavior."

"I have come to obtain His Majesty's pardon."

--- I'll definitely get your permission.

Though she thought that in her mind, Ellen responded meekly. Before leaving Tigre's mansion, she had consulted with Lim about a proper excuse.



"I was hired."

The audience was silent. King Victor was at a loss for words. His body trembled as he stared at Ellen. Ellen's solemn attitude remained.

"Employed... by whom?"

"Earl Tigrevurmud Vorn. He is an aristocrat of Brune and lord of Alsace. He is hiring one thousand of my men and me as their commander."

"The Vanadis of Zhcted is acting like a mercenary..."

A groan, mixed with the grinding of teeth, came from between Victor's thin lips.

Ellen ignored the reaction and began explaining the situation in Brune. She spoke of the clash that would inevitably occur between Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon in the near future.

"The territory I govern, LeitMeritz, is along the border with Brune. If a civil war occurs, it may spark trouble

here. When Earl Vorn decided to employ my services, I thought to use Alsace as a shield to prevent any problems occurring here."

"To think a spark may occur here is simply speculation ."

King Victor frowned maliciously.

"Though it may be speculation, I believe it will occur, Your Majesty. Duke Thenardier lawlessly violated his territory. In the confusion, he could easily expand his influence. For that reason, Earl Vorn---"

King Victor interrupted Ellen's words with a wave of his hand.

"This is still an invasion of Brune. This is not a problem of just LeitMeritz alone; it will lead to a war between Zhcted and Brune. I have no intention of doing such a thing."

When Ellen began to object, a woman willingly advanced.

"With all due respect, I wish to speak, Your Majesty."

Her pale golden hair gently undulated, and her irises were the color of beryl. She was around 20 years old.

Her gentle smile gave her a graceful atmosphere. She was a tall, beautiful woman with a charm differing from Ellen's. Her well-developed bosom and thin waist were wrapped in a pale green dress which extended down to her feet, and she had splendid curves which could enchant both man and woman alike.

Within her hand was a staff which let off a mysterious glow.

"... Sophia Obertas?"

King Victor sighed in annoyance. The beauty called Sophia bowed gracefully and placed her staff on the ground.

"Throughout history, there are numerous examples of a foreign power being employed to handle a domestic struggle for supremacy. There are far too many that I do not have the time to list them all. Eleanora has responded to Earl Vorn's request after judging its effects on LeitMeritz. Though there is an issue regarding the time it

took her to report to Your Majesty, the beast known as war has always valued speed above all else since ancient times. I believe she had no other choice."

Sophia spoke softly and modestly. Her words quietly sunk into his ears tinged with an atmosphere that was hard to reject.

King Victor nodded silently, prompting her to continue.

"The situation in Brune is exactly as she has said. I feel it unlikely that her actions will make new enemies. Should others come to learn of our intent, we need only explain the situation. If it should come to an attack, I believe we should welcome them."

Noise erupted between the courtiers.

Sophia was also a Vanadis. The weight of her words was different from those of others.

"... You wish to say I should allow Eleanora to do as she pleases?"

"Unlike the surrounding countries, we have an excuse to intervene in the civil war that will occur in Brune. If

you punish Eleanora here, we will throw away our right of domination to other countries."

King Victor closed his eyes and pressed against them with his fingers in irritation as he let out a sigh. As King of a country, he could not easily overlook this. He looked to Ellen in dissatisfaction.

"Eleanora. What is Earl Vorn's purpose? Will he deprive Duke Thenardier of all his territories after killing him? Is his ultimate goal the throne?"

Ellen looked downward. It was necessary to suppress her laughter.

--- Of course the King would think so... But it's difficult to imagine Tigre on the throne.

"According to his words, his goal is the peace of Alsace; however, he will not be able to achieve that until Duke Thenardier dies. He will likely gain some territory, though."

"What is the compensation for your services?"

"The reward corresponds to the quality of our service. He will pay our men, compensate for the cost of war, and reward soldiers as appropriate."

"And what of the territory you receive?"

--- So it's come down to this, after all.

The King was only afraid that Ellen may gain power.

"If he yields any land, I will not take a single bit of it. I will present it to Your Majesty. All people in this place are witnesses."

"... Very well. I will leave the affairs of Earl Vorn to you."

Ellen let out a soft breath hearing those words; she was finally freed.

"I have no intent in intervening in Brune's civil war. First and foremost, act in Zhcted's national interests and refrain from taking rash actions."

Ellen walked away from the audience and stopped moving once she had taken some distance.

Though the long corridor was not decorated, the sunshine entered between the columns at equal intervals, giving it a warm atmosphere. Ellen let out a breath of relief immediately after escaping the heavy air during the audience.

The members of the audience would definitely pass by this corridor. Ellen leaned against a pillar with her arms folded, waiting for Sophia.

Ellen looked blankly at the bureaucrats passing by but frowned suddenly when one girl appeared and walked straight toward her.

"--- As disgraceful as ever, Eleanora."

The girl spoke in a thorny tone and looked at her with contempt.

She was of small stature and had blue hair trimmed at her shoulders. Matching her hair were clothes made of blue silk luxuriously decorated with red and gold. In her hand was a short spear.

The spear had a mysterious atmosphere and silently released cold air. As if reacting to it, Arifal began wrapping itself in wind.

"... It seems you haven't grown at all, either, Ludmira."

Catching the girl's condescending gaze, Ellen smiled poorly toward the girl named Ludmira and placed her hand on her head in a familiar manner.

"Hm? Far from growing up, it seems you've shrunk. Perhaps your constant bowing and modest attitude are the reason. I should teach you how to stand upright so you can look taller. Incidentally, it'll make your breasts look larger."

"... It seems you can speak better. I am surprised the embodiment of rudeness and uncouth behavior, even if clad in human skin, can teach anything. I wonder if a star will fall tomorrow."

Even if she was angry, Ludmira did not follow Ellen's provocations. She calmly brushed off the hand stroking her head with a coercive attitude.

“I will have to refrain. Before you think of teaching me anything, you should look at yourself, first. Even a quick tempered and wild Dragon looks elegant compared to you.”

“... Returning an offer of good will with an insult. Isn't that quite a classy response?”

“Your courtesy is to insult a person's physical characteristics. It would be good to learn propriety, Eleanora.”

“Unfortunately, before I became a Vanadis, my life was unrelated to courtesy.”

Ellen laughed and shrugged in a hostile manner while Ludmira looked up and ridiculed her with her eyes.

“Courtesy and character are some of the few things possible to acquire with intent and effort. From your audience a moment ago, I could not feel any intellect or dignity as a Vanadis of Zhcted.”

"I'm not sure a woman who carries a bottle of tea and jam at her waist can speak of dignity."

Ellen's words finally touched a sore spot. Ludmira retorted angrily.

"I do not have it today. Unlike you, I understand there are appropriate times and places."

"To begin with, this is the first I've heard of dignity being a requirement for a Vanadis. Though it's your freedom to embrace such delusions, don't talk as if it were common sense."

With intense anger in their eyes, the two girls glared at one another. Language was no longer necessary. Ellen had her hand on her longsword, and Ludmira had grasped her short spear.

There was a hair-trigger atmosphere floating in the surroundings. Unfortunately, all the government officials had to pass by; they simply walked away, pretending they saw nothing.

"--- Take that."

A cute voice suddenly sounded between the two, as Ellen and Ludmira were hit with a hard thing.

“What...”

Ellen turned in anger, but swallowed the rest of her words.

Sophia Obertas smiled softly as she gazed at Ellen and Ludmira.

“Really. Fighting is bad, you two.”

There was nothing powerful in her words. She simply smiled and spoke as if scolding two mischievous children.

However, Ellen and Ludmira stood in silence with an awkward and annoyed expression respectively. They noticed, through the thin shield that was Sophia's beautiful face, that she was slightly angry. Though those used to seeing her would easily miss the faint change in her expression, they could easily tell she was mad. The two knew firsthand not to further offend Sophia.

“Honestly... Why is it that you two only quarrel when you see one another?”

"This woman---"

On reflex, Ellen and Ludmira pointed to each other and answered in harmony.

Because they began glaring at each other, Sophia hit their heads once again.

"By the way, Ellen. Why are you here? I thought you would have left the Royal Palace by now."

Although questioned by Sophia, Ellen mumbled for a moment, obediently expressing her gratitude.

"Thank you, Sophie. Your good word saved me. Though I didn't intend to give up obediently, it would have taken a lot longer."

"I believe if it were to go on any longer, your faults would be exposed."

"Look, it would not have been amusing at all if the dignity of all Vanadis were to be besmirched by your speech and conduct."

Sophia – Sophie – smiled bitterly as Ludmira huffed with a cold tone.

Ellen, while fiddling with the pearls sewn into her dress to conceal her irritation, spoke in a disgruntled manner.

"I need to talk to Sophie. You should get out of here."

"For both our sake, I will do that; however, I wish to hear something before I leave."

Ludmira, with arms folded, stared at Ellen seriously.

"--- This Earl Vorn, though I do not know what kind of country noble he is, but why would you partner with him and intervene in the civil war brewing in Brune?"

"Why should I bother to tell you? This has no relation to you."

Angered with his being called a country noble, Ellen answered in a voice that did not hide her anger.

"I feel sorry that he met up with a Vanadis like you."



Ludmira had a smile of pity as she left with her parting remark. She quietly walked down the hall of the Royal Palace.

The next moment, the sound of pearls rolling on the floor could be heard as they fell from Ellen's hands. She had torn them out of her dress without realizing, leaving small holes in her clothes.

“Sophie... Do you have any needle and thread?”

“This will only get worse if an amateur does this. Besides---”

After seeing Ludmira's small back disappear, Sophie lightly sighed. Her usual smile was erased, seeing as Ellen looked at her in embarrassment.

“Ellen. You... Yes. You have turned Ludmira into an enemy.”

Ellen's expression turned to that of a soldier hearing Sophie's words.

“Tell me in detail.”

In a corner of the vast Royal Palace, there was a small garden with a fountain.

Water was pulled from the moat and continued flowing except for during winter when the fountain would freeze. It was shaped like a large fish, and with the sound of the flowing water, it provided cover for both vision and sound. It was frequently used for secret meetings.

After grabbing some fruit juice from the kitchen, Ellen and Sophie visited the garden and sat at the edge of the fountain.

"Why will Ludmira become my enemy if I side with Tigre?"

"It is simple."

Sophie's pale golden hair rocked as she took a drink.

"Mira – Ludmira has a long association with Duke Thenardier."

"That girl and Thenardier?"

Ellen looked in disbelief.

“I don't understand. I investigated Duke Thenardier, and he's not the kind of person I would want to have ties with. He's the type she would hate. No, I don't know what she thinks...”

“Are you worried?”

“The area she governs, Olmutz, is near LeitMeritz.”

Ellen's response had become somewhat perverse. She quietly sipped her juice as she stared at Sophie.

The Vanadis' Dukedoms were scattered about Zhcted. Due to the various territories governed by the King, their lands were never adjacent.

There were two Dukedoms near LeitMeritz which belonged to other Vanadis, one of which was Olmutz. Ellen was not worried about the other Dukedom ruled by a Vanadis because she was, like Sophie, close with its ruler.

“It is not just her, either. Many aristocrats in this country have connections to Duke Thenardier or Duke Ganelon in some way.”

Ellen frowned. Sophie looked about and eventually set her eyes on the fountain as she watched the water flow.

“Ellen. Have you heard of the story [The Merchant of Muenz]?”

“I haven't. Who's that?”

“It was a story from before we were born. A man named Muenz and his wife had a son and daughter. Every day, he was violent towards the three. There was not a single day they did not have a swollen face, they had bruises all over their body, and they cried in pain at night.”

“... This is the kind of story that makes the juice taste bad.”

Ellen clearly looked displeased.

“A certain day, Muenz was stabbed by his son and died. There were many people who lamented his death.”

Ellen looked at Sophie, hearing such unexpected words. Sophie smiled with mixed feelings.

"As a merchant, Muenz was more honest and competent than anyone else. He never broke a promise, he was never late, and his goods were always of high quality."

"... So Thenardier is the same."

"Yes. Duke Ganelon, who is hostile toward him, is as well. Aside from domestic affairs, they do everything to represent Brune in such a manner that they do not bring shame to their country. They are from reliable and distinguished families who govern vast, rich lands, and they are widely adaptable... Even you trade with people you do not get along with, correct?"

Ellen could not object; rather, she pouted like a sulking child. Sophie continued speaking as she looked at Ellen with care.

"Duke Thenardier is now the enemy of both Earl Vorn and you. There are benefits if he wins, and it will be problematic for many if he loses."

Ellen placed the ceramic glass with juice down and looked at it in disgust.

"I understand what you're saying. So, Ludmira is one of those people."

"That is correct. However, Ellen, your evaluation of Ludmira is correct. She does not like Duke Thenardier; rather, you may say she hates him."

"In that case---"

Her words were stuck in her throat.

"Right. [The Merchant of Muenz]."

Sophie's golden hair swayed as she shook her head.

"Above all, they have had a long relationship. It is something that has existed since long before that girl was born. It is an excellent connection which has lasted many decades. Do you seriously think that child will end it due to her personal emotions?"

"Certainly..."

She let out a few words. Ellen dimly gazed at the water flowing out of the fountain as her legs dangled.

"--- By the way, Ellen. There is something I would also like to ask you."

"What?"

Ellen sat up and glanced at Sophie to her side.

"Earl Vorn. What kind of person is he that you would willingly support him?"

Ellen's reaction was delayed having been taken by surprise. Her words were a mixture of embarrassment and confusion.

"Well, um... How should I say this, he's pretty cute."

Oh my. Sophie placed her hand to her mouth as she smiled. She was unexpectedly surprised. Though Sophie thought Ellen was helping him for political motives, she could guess a more base reason from Ellen's expression.

She was suddenly interested in the man named Tigre who could make Ellen wear such an expression. Sophie leaned forward slightly and repeated Ellen's words.

"Cute, is it? Can you give me an example?"

Sophie continued to pursue the issue. Ellen moved about in a ticklish manner.

“Right... There are a number of things, but if I were to mention one, maybe it would be his sleeping face.”

“My. You have a relationship where you can see his sleeping face?”

“Do, don't say anything stupid. He's the one that always sleeps.”

While Sophie was clearly becoming more interested, Ellen denied the accusation, her face red from ear to ear.

“On a more serious note, while he has a number of faults, he is a man who thinks of his people and is willing to risk his life for them. Tigre is also very talented with the bow. I've never seen anything like it before.”

“My, Earl Vorn is from Brune, right?”

Sophie's doubt was a natural reaction. It was well known to the neighboring countries that the Kingdom of Brune held the bow in contempt.

"That guy, he dropped a Wyvern (Vyfal) in the sky with a single arrow."

Ellen's crimson eyes shined brightly like a child. She was grinning and laughing in satisfaction.

"Oh my, how amazing."

Sophie smiled. Given her expression, she thought of it as a joke. Ellen simply shrugged her shoulders, desperately trying to keep from laughing in the back of her mind.

Her disbelief was amusing rather than mortifying.

After praising and belittling Tigre for a while, Ellen concluded the conversation.

"You should meet him and speak to him in person for the rest. You can see Lunie then as well, right?"

Lunie was the name of the infant Dragon kept in the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz.

Though it was difficult to imagine from her gentle personality, Sophie was an avid lover of Dragons. It was

because she wanted to see Lunie that she frequently traveled to LeitMeritz, which is how the two became intimate.

Incidentally, contrary to Sophie's feelings, Lunie would always try to fly away and escape the moment it noticed her presence.

“If you tell me in advance, I'll introduce you to Tigre. I'd like to show you his archery by all means.”

“I look forward to it.”

Sophie nodded with joy dying her beryl eyes.

Ellen did not mention Tigre's black bow to the King. Though she trusted Sophie, she judged it better not to speak.

After finishing their juice, the two left the garden.

“Sophie, I want to ask you something.”

While walking in an unpopulated hallway, Ellen spoke with a serious expression.

"Do you want me to investigate into the Vanadis and powerful nobles with relations with Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon?"

Sophie's smile did not break in the slightest as she responded, her finger to her mouth in thought.

"As expected of you, but there's something else I'd like you to check. See if there's anyone with connections to Duke Thenardier who can train Dragons."

"Dragon...?"

Sophie looked at her with wide eyes. Ellen nodded strongly.

"There was an Earth Dragon (Suro) and Wyvern (Vyfal)."

Despite what people might think from the elegant dress and gentle atmosphere Sophie wore, she excelled in collecting information.

Though the Vanadis are superior in military arts, Ellen evaluated her abilities above even those.

"Since it is a request from you, then I shall look into it. I am quite anxious hearing this as well."

"Thanks a lot. I'll let you hug Lunie as much as you want next time. I'll make sure he doesn't run away."

Ellen mercilessly decided the young Dragon's fate. Sophie smiled joyfully in response.

"Oh my, I will enjoy that."

"By the way... Just to be on the safe side, do either you or Sasha have a connection with Thenardier or Ganelon?"

"I suppose you should be happy, but neither Sasha nor I have such a connection. We will declare neutrality toward your actions."

The gate of the Royal Palace had finally come into view. After finishing her business, Ellen said goodbye to Sophie before leaving the Palace. She looked up to the sky, squinting as the sunlight shined down.

--- I wonder how Tigre is.

She had obtained permission from the King. For now, she would quickly join Tigre.

“Now then, let's do this.”

Territoire

The Black Dragon (Zirnitra) Flag waved in the cool breeze at the end of autumn.

Beside the Black Dragon Flag were two other banners. One was the Vorn family crest with a white crescent-moon and meteor on a blue background, and Ellen's flag which had a silver sword on a black background.

Beneath the refreshing, blue, cloudless sky, one hundred cavalry from Zhcted advanced down the road in an orderly fashion toward Territoire.

A man and woman – Tigre and Lim – stood at the head.

“Please accurately state the name of His Majesty in our country.”

“Um, Victa... no, it's different. Victor Arthur.”

Tigre found himself at a loss for words, and he could speak no further properly. Lim, walking alongside him on her horse, let out a sigh and lightly hit Tigre's head with a thin branch.

"Victor Arthur Volk Estes Tur Zhcted. Victor is His Majesty's name, Arthur is a name passed down from his grandfather, Volk is a name granted to him by his father who hoped he would grow up to be strong like a wolf, Estes is his family name, and Tur is granted to royalty. This is the third time, now. Please remember it."

Tigre looked like a scolded child who had just been struck.

They had left Celesta a few days ago, and they had continued at this rate.

Dozens of sheets of paper were bundled together like a textbook in Lim's hand as she rode on horseback in her armor. Without a single gap in the words, the history of Zhcted, its mythology, and many of its traditional events were written.

"... Do I really need to remember this?"

"Lord Tigrevurmud. Do you understand your position ?"

Tigre inadvertently grumbled. Lim started gazing at him coldly, nearly freezing his backbone.

"You are Eleanora-sama's captive. In the future, you will have frequent opportunities to travel throughout the country, so you must understand the situation in our land."

It was an unpleasant future, though he could not say that in front of her.

"You must learn basic knowledge so you do not embarrass Eleanora-sama. Please learn this as quickly as possible."

--- I know what you want to say... But I haven't even had a break since we left Celesta. We've been doing this even on the march.

"Your response?"

"I'll do my best, Teacher."

There was no energy in Tigre's voice. Lim folded up the papers and put it away. At the very least, their session had come to an end.

"By the way, what festival has been held since ancient times to celebrate the coming of spring and the end of winter?"

It was an unexpected question; Tigre stared at Lim involuntarily. Fortunately, his head managed to move somehow, and, after a moment, the answer came to him.

"I believe... It was the Solar Festival (Maslenitsa)."

"Correct."

Lim's stern expression melted like ice and gave way to a soft smile.

"Since our winter is longer than Brune's, you may be able to see it."

Lim changed the mood with her invitation as she turned around.

"Take a break. I will check on the soldiers."

Watching Lim's back as she departed, Tigre dropped his shoulders and let out a sigh.

"Cheers for the hard work, Lord Tigrevurmud."

Lim was replaced by a Knight. He was a young man in his 20s and had refined features. His carefully shaved head without a single hair left a strong impression.

The Knight's name was Rurick, and he was the most skilled archer amongst Ellen's soldiers. He was also on best terms with Tigre.

"You should have come up earlier. I could have used your help."

"If I had done such a thing, Miss Limlisha would have glared at me. Besides, it was quite pleasing watching a teacher and her student from a distance."

"It was like torture for the party concerned, though."

Tigre shook his head to remove his feelings of fatigue and changed the subject.

"How are Teita and Batran?"

Moving behind the Zhcted Army were the soldiers of Celesta. The two who served Tigre, Teita and Batran, were amongst them.

Though Tigre opposed Teita's decision to follow him, her willful demand was unexpectedly supported by Lim.

“It is best to have an attendant close by your side.”

“... Am I really that bad?”

“Do you remember the evaluation Eleanora-sama and I gave you when we left LeitMeritz?”

Lim spoke coldly, completely silencing Tigre.

In Tigre's heart, he was also reluctant to leave Teita alone in his mansion for two reasons.

After he pushed the Thenardier Army back, Tigre scolded Teita.

“I'm glad for your feelings of wanting to wait for me, Teita, but it's useless if you don't escape at those times.”

Teita apologized with tears in her hazel eyes. It had made Tigre anxious.

His thoughts of not wanting Teita to feel lonely again eventually led to accepting Teita accompanying them.

"There are no particular problems. Teita is quite popular amongst the soldiers. Even Miss Limlisha looks at her gently."

"Lim?"

Rurick's words were unexpected.

"Perhaps it is because they are both female. Miss Limlisha gets along well with Teita."

Tigre was relieved to hear she was liked amongst the soldiers; if that were the case, she should be fine.

"Batran is a good talker, and he is rather strong when playing chess or card games."

When they made camp to rest, Batran joined in with the soldiers as they played games to entertain themselves .

"Batran was the one who taught me card games. Ah, it was always like he saw through me."

"Yes, I can understand your feelings."

Rurick shrugged his shoulders. Tigre held back his laughter as he imagined the scene.

“It sounds fun. Maybe I should join.”

“--- Who should join what?”

Rurick quickly shut his mouth as Lim's cold voice came from behind.

“No, um...”

After watching Rurick stumble over his words, Tigre responded with a weak tone.

“I thought it might be fun to join everyone, something like that...”

“Very well.”

Lim nodded frankly.

“However, only if you can answer the ten questions I will say now. If you wish to join the troops, you must give your responses today.”

Tigre let out a sigh of despair and leaned unceremoniously against his horse. The horse neighed and shook in dissatisfaction.

In the end, Tigre was not freed from Lim's grasp until they reached Territoire.

The town of Belfort was in the center of Territoire.

When they could see the town, Tigre sent Batran as a messenger to obtain approval for the Zhcted Army to enter the town.

“Batran, have you been to this town before?”

“Yes. Urz-sama... when your father was a youth, I came here several times with him as an attendant.”

Batran continued to speak as he looked at the gently undulating meadows beyond the town.

“Territoire is unlike our land; it has long fields that extend all the way to the mountains---”

He pointed to the Vosyes Mountains far to the south.

"The people by the Vosyes Mountains plant grape fields, and the cattle in these areas graze in the pastures. Many here also keep pigeons as pets."

Before long, they received consent to enter the town. Tigre entered with Lim and Batran – Tigre had asked Batran to attend as someone who was knowledgeable with the area.

Lim was covered in her armor as well as a helmet. When Tigre asked why, her response was curt.

"Because a female Knight is conspicuous."

Belfort was far larger than Celesta, and the roads were paved with stone.

However, the houses themselves were not so different. They were made with wood, stone, and brick, and the walls were plastered. There were some buildings with thatched roofs and noticeable stones sticking out.

Though a familiar sight to Batran and Tigre, it was unusual for Lim. She looked about restlessly in curiosity.

"Lord Tigrevurmud, what are those round stones on the roof for?"

The stone was about the size of an adult head, and there were almost always three or four on a building.

At that time, something moved in Tigre's heart. It was the mischievous nature of a poor student who was always scolded and wanted to tease his stern teacher.

“The roof will fall off from the wind without those holding it down.”

“Is that so?”

Lim nodded in admiration without showing any sign of doubt. While Tigre felt guilty from her obedient reaction, Batran laughed heartily.

“It was simply a joke; please ignore the Young Lord. During the daytime, it is heated by the sun, and it can be used in a variety of ways at night.”

“... Is that so?”

Lim glanced coldly toward Tigre. Her quiet voice full of anger sharply pierced him.

"Though I thought I may have been a little harsh, it seems you still have room to relax. Perhaps I shall increase your workload starting tomorrow."

"... Um, can I even give an excuse?"

"Please sit upright. You are the General of an army. Your voice must remain dignified; you cannot be so timid as to admit your crimes so carelessly."

Tigre's entreaty was coldly rejected as Lim criticized him without mercy. Though Batran somehow understood the situation, he could only smile wryly as he watched.

They had reached the residence of Viscount Augre. It was also built with wood, stones, and brick, but it was nearly double the size of Tigre's mansion. There was a dovecote found in the entrance of the household.

"Dovecote?"

Lim looked doubtful as Tigre gave an honest explanation.

“It is where pigeons are kept and fed. Given its size, it likely houses around one hundred. Do they not have these in Zhcted?”

“Though there are hen houses, I have never heard of a dovecote. We do not eat pigeons...”

After leaving public notice and entering the mansion, Lim took off her helmet and held it beneath her arm.

Since Batran visited as a messenger beforehand, they were quickly taken to the Viscount's room after leaving their arms aside.

It was a simple room, unexpected from the Lord's private chamber.

The furniture was simple, and a crystal vase near the window drew a mysterious pattern of light on the floor.

The old, no-nonsense man smiled as he stood up. He was the the man who governed Territoire, Hugues Augre .

“Oh, you came, Tigre. Excuse me, that was impolite, Earl Vorn.”

“It has been a long time, Viscount Augre.”

Tigre bowed as he looked at the elder man with care.

“Are you unwell? If so, we can come another day---”

Tigre thought his condition may have been poor and he was sleeping, but the old Viscount simply smiled and shook his head.

“What, I'm just a bit injured; there's no need to exaggerate it. I'm sure seeing you after you've come so far will do my body some good.”

He was not putting on a show of strength, which gave Tigre a sense of relief.

“It's so nostalgic. You came to my house when you were still a small child. Do you remember?”

“Eh? Um...”

A cold sweat flowed down Tigre's back. He wondered if he had been careless in some manner; he had no memory of it at all. If he visited, it would have been when Tigre was still 8 or 9.

The old man smiled in amusement seeing Tigre's inability to respond. His thin body shook, little by little.

“I believe you found the talk of old men boring and went to explore the house. The maids found you snoring and drooling in bed.”

It was not just Lim, who stood next to him, but Batran as well, who turned around and looked at Tigre in amazement. Tigre bowed deeply in silence.

“To think you would ignore an important guest of your father, and now you have grown up and allied yourself with the Zhcted Army. So this is the Vanadis of Zhcted.”

“I apologize for the delayed introduction. She is Limlisha, the trusted aide of the Vanadis, Eleanora Viltaria.”

Lim silently bowed toward the old Viscount. For his own impoliteness, Augre also returned a greeting.

He looked serious as he returned his gaze to Tigre. It was a complete change from a moment ago.

"Now then... I roughly understand your circumstances from Massas' letter, but I would appreciate it if you could tell me the entire story."

After Augre heard the entire story from Tigre, his face held a difficult expression.

"To abandon my stance of neutrality and fight with Duke Thenardier..."

"Please, I ask for your help."

"I must ask to be sure, but you are not hiding anything ?"

He stared at Tigre with an overwhelming strength. Though Tigre was almost overwhelmed, he focused his body and responded calmly.

"If I have done anything wrong, I would not be able to move the soldiers in a fight against Duke Thenardier."

"Hm, certainly..."

Augre looked down deep in thought. Tigre silently waited for his answer.

“---Earl Vorn.”

Before long, Augre called Tigre's name in a low voice.

“I will tell you honestly that I must refuse your request . Even if you are acting justly, you are powerless before Duke Thenardier. Though it is honorable to fight for a just cause, I cannot possibly bring my soldiers, my people, to war without a chance of victory.”

Batran frowned upon hearing his words, but Tigre raised his hand to restrain him. The old Viscount had more to say.

“However, it is not just Earl Massas but the Zhcted Army that has become your ally. It seems you have the means to fight Duke Ganelon and Duke Thenardier.”

“Then you will lend us your strength?”

“I would like to say yes... but there is little strength in these old bones. I will help in your fight if you give me your aid.”

"What do you mean?"

Lim narrowed her eyes slightly as she sat next to Tigre, though neither Tigre nor Augre noticed due to how minimal the change was.

Augre turned his gaze to the window and looked at the flowing meadows and Vosyes Mountains in the distance.

"There is a band of thieves in the Vosyes Mountains. Those bastards attack the nearby village, burn the land, kill the people, kidnap the women, and steal their money and livestock. I cannot simply leave it. I want you to lead your army to Vosyes... I want you to get rid of them."

He spoke bitterly and clenched his hand, unable to suppress his anger.

"Could it be due to your injury?"

"I said it a while ago. It is not a serious injury."

Augre looked back and smiled after seeing Tigre's anxious face.

"It should heal in a few days, but I cannot return to battle. Though he's making more trouble of it than he should, it is true I cannot leave my bed."

Augre turned his entire body to Tigre.

"Earl Vorn. I ask this of you. Will you hold off this band of thieves in my place?"

He spoke solemnly and bowed as much as he could.

"I have asked various aristocrats in the vicinity to lend their aid to my son, but it is still unsatisfactory. Even if I find more people, there is no telling what will happen when the villages are attacked. I wish to force them back to suppress the damage they cause, no matter what."

"Do you know how many there are?"

Lim asked from the side with an expression and voice which lacked any intonation.

"Approximately two hundred."

Tigre was stunned for a moment; it was twice the size of the Zhcted Army he was currently leading.

"Originally, they were a small group from Zhcted with fewer than forty, but pirates from Asvarre and a mercenary named Donalbein joined them, so they quickly gained power. Though we had three hundred men, we were defeated."

Tigre was impressed by the strength of the unknown leader of thieves. He had two hundred men and the ability to lead them.

Though the Zhcted soldiers with him were amongst the elite, it would be difficult for them to fight an adversary with double their number.

--- This can't be left alone, especially if they are making the Vosyes Mountains their stronghold.

Vosyes Mountains expanded to the north and south and acted as a border between Alsace and LeitMeritz.

If the bandits headed north, they would reach the area between the two territories, jeopardizing the peace there.

Furthermore, they would likely interfere with Tigre's movements along the mountains.

Tigre began to open his mouth, but did not speak before glancing at Lim. With a short confirmation, he turned back to Augre.

“I understand. Leave this to us.”

By the time Tigre and the others left Viscount Augre's household, the sun had sunk quite a bit.

The sky to the west was dyed crimson. It looked as if the sun were desperately pushing back the darkness as the curtain of night spread.

In contrast, the eastern sky was dark, and the moon was faintly visible.

When they left the town, the Zhcted Army had completed preparing its camp. They made a simple double fence in the surroundings, which gave it an inconsistent feeling.

“You won't be staying in the town?”

Rurick looked at him curiously. He had thought Tigre would borrow a room in the Viscount's household.

“There are a few reasons, but I thought I'd stay here with everyone.”

At that time, Teita ran up with short steps. She wore her maid uniform with the apron removed. It seems she moved about the Zhcted camp dressed in this manner.

“Tigre-sama, welcome back. Did everything turn out well?”

“We only talked. Aren't you tired, Teita?”

Tigre smiled gently and patted Teita's head.

“You do not need to worry. I was helping prepare the meals until a moment ago.”

“Meals during a march are important, right? Soup can be made quite delicious with just a slight change in the salt...”

Teita stretched her chest out proudly as she heard Rurick's words.

Tigre was happy for Teita. He was uneasy about bringing her, but she held out in her own way. Teita had firmly built her place amongst them.

"Just make sure not to overwork yourself. Batran, please help Teita."

Teita and Batran left while Tigre entered a tent with Rurick and Lim. After hanging the lantern, the three sat in a circle.

After Rurick heard what happened at the mansion, Tigre placed a piece of paper on the ground. He began to summarize the information on the bandits given to him by Viscount Augre.

"Augre led three hundred soldiers to defeat the thieves and was defeated."

The Viscount was involved in an unexpectedly difficult battle.

Even though they were superior in number, they were simply field workers who were given armor and weaponry. Their morale was high since they saw the cruel attacks and burned villages, but it was not enough to compensate for their lack of training.

Furthermore, the geographical advantage belonged to the bandits. While attackers would have to invade up the

mountains, they could descend with stones and bow and arrow. They had many advantages.

The Viscount blockaded the mountain path in an attempt to confine them in the mountain.

However, there was a miscalculation. When the Viscount's army appeared on foot, the bandits pounced on them in the mountains.

They discarded their geographical advantage and attacked the army in the fields.

The band of thieves and Augre's Army clashed at the base of the mountain.

They used hatchets, swords, axes, and leather armor reinforced with iron and fur to fight.

Augre's Army began to push them back, and, eventually, the bandits abandoned the field and retreated . The Augre Army used their momentum to chase after those who were fleeing.

They left the field and rushed to the mountain path.

By the time they entered the mountain road, the sky had darkened.

Stones were thrown, arrows were shot, and earth and sand were poured over the soldiers like a hailstorm. Logs were dropped as well, crushing many men.

They realized they had fallen into a trap, but it was too late. Their corpses quickly piled up on the mountain path .

Viscount Augre pulled his soldiers away to retreat to the fields.

By the time the army pulled out of the mountains, dozens of people had been sacrificed. The Augre Army lost many men in the mountains.

By the time they reached Belfort, their army of three hundred had decreased to two hundred. The Viscount was also injured, so his son, Gerard, was forced to run about in his stead.

“This group of two hundred... seems quite a difficult enemy.”

Rurick had a serious countenance upon hearing the entire story. He hit his bald head with his beefy hands which did not suit the man's naturally gentle mannerisms.

“Lord Tigrevurmud, do you have any plans?”

“Regrettably, no.”

“How about this. Lord Tigrevurmud, you enter the mountain with fifty arrows. When they descend, you kill fifty men and retreat... You can repeat this four times.”

“An interesting proposal. Do you really think I can find and kill that many people?”

Tigre half-glared at Rurick for saying outrageous things.

“That will be our last resort.”

The two turned in surprise hearing Lim's curt response . Lim looked at the paper; it was not a fight that needed too much planning. She did not want to spend a lot of time on it.

"We should finish this quickly. I would rather not take too much time."

The next morning, Teita and Batran were left in the town, and Tigre and Lim left Belfort followed by one hundred from the Zhcted Army.

It would take just under a day on horseback to reach the Vosyes Mountains from Belfort.

"By the way, there is something I would like you to see , Lord Tigrevurmud."

Lim advanced her horse next to his and took out a few sheets of paper which were carefully folded from her saddle.

Tigre took them and frowned after opening one of them.

"... What is this?"

"After we left Alsace, I have calculated the war expenditures until today. This is your burden."

Tigre peeled his eyes away. His entire body froze in shock as he tried to look to the sky, resulting in him falling back. Lim used her shield to support Tigre.

The paper had the expenses for tool repair, costs incurred during the march, such as fuel, food, firewood, horse feed, and medicine, and the salary for one hundred men.

The hand holding the paper trembled as Tigre thought about the amount of money. He felt like his body was bound with invisible chains. It was suffocating even thinking about it.

"... Even when I commanded one hundred soldiers, it was never this expensive. Why so much?"

"The cost of cavalry is quite significant compared to the cost of infantry."

Lim continued speaking as if it were natural.

"The people you typically lead are villagers who cultivate the fields. You are now leading soldiers who are trained to fight. Their capability is high, and they are fighting in the harvesting season, so it is natural their salary reflects that."

Tigre grasped his dull red hair and held the paper strong enough that it might tear. Though it would be possible to pay with his savings in Alsace, he wanted to avoid it.

“I would recommend you not pay with Alsace's savings.”

He was seen through.

Tigre looked at Lim curiously, hearing her not recommend him to take that course of action.

“I saw all the data. Lord Tigrevurmud, was there something you were trying to do? Perhaps pasturing.”

“... It was a big success.”

Tigre sighed deeply. He had learned many things from her in LeitMeritz. Lim was quite adept in such aspects.

“It was my father's idea. He had saved little by little before I succeeded Alsace. Using those savings, he wanted to purchase horses.”

The horse had many uses. Using them, Alsace could become more prosperous.

“It is a good idea. I believe you should continue to work toward that goal.”

Tigre was glad to hear Lim's frank approval, but he had a difficult face as well.

“But I have no other ways of paying.”

Tigre looked over his shoulder toward the Zhcted soldiers following them.

“Yes, which is why we shall consider that from now on .”

Though Lim's face lacked any affability, Tigre felt she was enjoying it in some manner; however, that may have been nothing but an illusion.

Lim took the paper from Tigre and carefully removed the wrinkles from it.

"By the way – this much is necessary, even with one hundred cavalry. The two hundred who continue to steal and plunder take far more than that."

Tigre finally understood why Lim brought up the war expenditures.

"The bandits will attack a nearby village soon."

"The time it takes for them to attack and pillage will take a few days."

"Any more and it will be impossible to afford the costs of recovery."

With an impatient, but focused, heart, Tigre strongly grasped his bridle.

Early the next morning, with only a half koku march to reach the Vosyes Mountains, Lim stopped the soldiers. Lim split the one hundred cavalry into two, making eighty dismount from their horses.

Twenty soldiers were left to defend the horses while the remaining eighty continued the march. There were

only a dozen people riding horses, including Tigre and Lim.

“--- Lord Tigrevurmud.”

Lim moved next to Tigre and called his name.

“This time, you are in charge of the battle. Please focus on how our troops move, how the enemy moves, and the flow of battle. I wish for you to gain the capability to command them as quickly as possible.”

Tigre brooded over her words. It was true he had little experience in war.

Due to their long association with himself and his father Urz, Batran and his men had a strong trust in him.

However, that was not true for the Zhcted soldiers. They were here at Ellen and Lim's behest, and it would not be good if he took command over troops who did not particularly have faith in him.

He should learn, even if only a little.

“I understand. I will try.”

When the sun had risen more, at approximately mid-morning, the eighty Zhcted soldiers reached the foot of the Vosyes Mountains.

As if waiting for them, there were shadows stealing from the fields near the mountain path. They had likely been watching since they saw the Zhcted Army. This was most likely since they responded so quickly.

They stood shoulder to shoulder. Some wore leather armor, others were shirtless and held large battle axes. Some had helmets without any other armor. There was no particular order or set weaponry.

The thieves attacked them and gave whoops of joy as they hunted their prey. The Zhcted Army also let loose a roar, despite the ambush.

Tigre remained outside the field of battle so as to keep a wide range of vision.

Though he clutched the heirloom black bow and had an arrow grasped, ready to nock, Tigre simply stared at the battlefield.

The Zhcted soldiers prevented the bandits' onslaught with their shields while others fought back with their

shields upright, and pierced through the gap between them with their spears. Soldiers in the rear shot their arrows all at once. Dozens of arrows rained down mercilessly on the thieves.

--- The battlefield is a flat grassland, and the enemy... does not have two hundred people. It looks to be about half that.

As Tigre silently watched the soldiers and thieves collide on the field, something caught his eye.

--- They shouldn't have the money to have that kind of weaponry.

There were ten people who were dressed in solid iron armor and wore helmets and swords.

--- It seems like there are units of ten, so they could be the Commanders, but...

Tigre tilted his head. His thoughts broke off there.

In a certain area, the formation began to crumble. The shields were split by battle axes, and the soldiers were thrown off balance.

Tigre's actions were fast. As he quickly nocked his arrow, he advanced through the wave of soldiers on his horse. With fewer than one hundred Zhcted soldiers and thieves clashing, Tigre was able to aim immediately.

The bowstring trembled as he fired the arrow. It pierced through the throat of the enemy, as if the man had inhaled it, and he collapsed to the ground in the confusion of the fight.

Tigre continuously shot arrows, felling three more bandits. The momentum the bandits had built was lost in an instant.

In contrast, the Zhcted soldiers became more vigorous. The formation that collapsed was reorganized, and the thieves were pushed back.

Next to Tigre, who stroked his chest in relief, Lim gave commands indifferently.

“--- Retreat.”

The Zhcted soldiers huddled together with their shields up and placed their swords and spears in the gap. While restraining the bandits' movements, they slowly

pulled away. The resulting space created in their retreat was taken up by the thieves as they brandished their weaponry.

The bandits were energetic from having defeated Viscount Augre's army the other day; however, fighting the Zhcted Army which valued defense, they were forced to attack.

Lim ordered the men to retreat even further. The Zhcted Army pulled back one belsta (about one kilometer) before rejoining their formations.

In the confusion, the thieves had spread out thinly.

That is when the change occurred.

Suddenly, cavalry appeared from the south of the meadow, wrapping behind the bandits. They were surprised by the attack and retreated in a panic when they noticed they had pulled too far away from the mountains.

Lim did not miss the change in flow and ordered a counterattack in her typical indifferent tone. The Zhcted soldiers discarded their shields and wielded their spears, fiercely attacking the bandits.

Many retreated, staggering backwards and pushing others aside. Others stood their ground and fought back, only to be cut down from all sides.

Furthermore, the cavalry which had appeared a moment ago had cut their line of retreat to the mountains .

With their path of retreat cut off, the thieves who could not escape or surrender were killed.

The number of bandits killed in the field were approximately sixty. Twenty had surrendered, and the rest fled to the mountains.

On the other hand, two men from the Zhcted Army had been killed. Ten others were injured.

After burying the dead, those who surrendered were handed over to Viscount Augre. The Zhcted Army issued ten horsemen to keep guard as they made their way to Belfort. The soldiers with severe injuries were also sent back.

Those remaining fortified their position.

They built a wide and deep trench and made a sturdy fence made of thick branches following the same fundamental structure of the camp they created near Belfort.

Once their camp was complete, the sun had set, and the soldiers took to their meals.

A large pot was filled with water. Potatoes were chopped, and the water was salted. Turnips and onions were added for sweetness, and the entire pot was stirred.

“It smells good. What is it?”

Rurick asked Tigre, who was busy stirring the pot.

“We call it fish soup. It's eaten everywhere in our country and keeps our body warm.”

“That's right. Because Tigre-san is a person from Brune , he should take care. There might be a big fight over the food.”

A soldier next to Rurick warmed his hands by the fire as he looked up at Tigre.

“Fight?”

Rurick quickly responded as Tigre cocked his head.

“The seasonings are different for every home. In some places, garlic is added. In others, alcohol is used.”

“This could cause a dispute, so you might want to add some garlic in it for everyone.”

The soldiers laughed alongside Tigre.

Aside from the fish soup, supper included bread and honey. Despite the deaths of their comrades, the soldiers' morale was high, and many sung merrily.

Tigre separated from Rurick and headed to his tent. Tigre returned to his tent and sat around a pan of soup with Lim. He was anxious at first.

“Before we left for the foot of the mountain, did you have the men get off the horses so the cavalry could make a detour?”

With the horses doubling the number of humans, the cavalry would have a sharp increase in mobility. It made

surprise attacks possible, depending on the distance, and with their small number, it would be difficult to see from the mountain.

"There was another aim."

"... You decreased the number of troops to invite the enemy?"

Hearing Tigre's words, Lim blinked a few times and smiled.

"I knew if we retreated, they would return to the mountains. Still, they still had high morale from their victory the other day."

Lim had set a trap. By reducing the number of attackers, the enemy would be more likely to fall for it.

She had carefully watched their movements and used their path of retreat against them. Lim explained it as if it were nothing; Tigre leaked a breath of admiration.

--- It's no wonder Ellen trusts her so deeply.

"I will say this only once."

While Tigre was completely impressed with her abilities, Lim was amazed by something else.

“This victory is thanks to you, Lord Tigrevurmud. You used your arrows to immediately destroy the enemy's morale when our troops collapsed. If you had been slower, we may have lost the battle.”

Though it was a small battle, Tigre's skill with the bow and accurate judgment surprised Lim again.

“I'm happy you would say that.”

Though Tigre was obediently pleased, his reaction was somewhat dissatisfying for Lim.

--- He should take pride and boast of his skills a little more.

However, Lim hesitated to say that. Instead, she spoke of something else.

“What do you think the enemy will do in the future?”

Tigre tilted his head hearing her question.

"... That's right. They will withdraw from the mountain for a time and keep watch on us. They may use footpaths to attack nearby villages in the meantime."

"There are other mountain paths?"

"It might seem a little sudden, but there will be many animal trails which are rarely used. I have lived in the mountains for a long time and can think of several ways to climb them. If they have two hundred men, they are very likely to have discovered many such roads."

Because he had experience walking through the forests and mountains of his hometown, Tigre's words were persuasive.

"Right. They still have more than one hundred men remaining. They cannot survive only on mountain herbs and wild game. They will attack us first, since we will hinder their ability to plunder the villages."

Because the soup had finally finished cooking, Tigre placed its contents onto a platter and passed it to Lim before preparing his own.

Lim thanked Tigre and began to eat with a mystified expression.

“There's meat.”

“That reminds me, Teita said she managed to procure some pigeon meat.”

As he casually replied, something flashed through Tigre's mind. Tigre looked vacantly at the light leaking from the lamp in the tent, deep in thought.

“Are you waiting for it to cool?”

Being called out by Lim, Tigre returned with a start. He panicked and pointed about with his spoon as he told his idea to Lim.

Lim stopped eating and looked at him quizzically as she listened to him speak.

“That is quite a dangerous hand. Besides, who could possibly...”

“I will do it.”

Tigre answered frankly without any sign of eagerness. Lim simply glared at him with a hint of anger in her eyes .

“... I believe I just said it would be dangerous.”

“Which is why I will do it.”

Tigre's dark eyes looked straight into Lim's blue irises.

“This is my fight. If I can't even risk my own life, how could I possibly ask you to help me?”

“Please do not mistake courage and recklessness. You have shown your courage many times, already. Now is not the time for you to risk your life.”

Lim was unwilling to withdraw. She leaned forward, as if to overwhelm Tigre with her entire body.

“Eleanora-sama has gone to the King's Capital for you. If something were to happen to you, all would be for nothing!”

“I'll make sure nothing happens.”

Tigre made a declaration.

"At the very least, until I am assured of Alsace's peace, I will never fall."

He added his words with a smile.

"You said you wanted to end this battle quickly. I do as well."

Lim was unable to respond.

This was an unanticipated fight. Lim had not yet thought of a solution that could end the theft and destruction of the fields, especially with fewer than one hundred cavalry. The battle would be long if they continued as they were, and it was necessary to maintain the strength of the army.

Finally, Lim gave up. She consented, so long as Tigre gave priority to his safety and ran away at any sign of danger.

After the Zhcted Army and the bandits made their moves, three days had finally passed.

The Vosyes Mountains to the north lay between Alsace and LeitMeritz. Amongst the steep mountains was a single mountain path. There was not much difference to the south.

There was only a single road which could be called a mountain pass, and it wound around the surrounding hills in a snakelike manner, so few used it.

At the top of the path was a small, dilapidated castle fort.

Though it was something built by either Brune or Zhcted, neither claimed rights to it, so it became inhabited by the bandits who attacked the fields.

Because it was impossible to house two hundred people in it, there were many crude houses made of stone in the surroundings. The leader, Donalbein, and the girls they had kidnapped monopolized the fort, along with a few people who were accepted.

Donalbein had become 33 this year. Beneath his short, black hair was a thick face and rugged eyes. Before arriving here, he had passed through numerous battlefields as a mercenary. He was a soldier who had slayed many Generals.

Such a man was now cornered.

He had lost many men when one hundred soldiers came to avenge their previous loss. Three days had since passed.

The army which fought beneath the Black Dragon (Zirnitra) Flag had settled in a base at the foot of the mountain.

--- Like I thought, the food situation here is poor.

There was not much game to hunt in the area. Without the Zhcted Army moving away, Donalbein and his men would starve.

Donalbein had sent scouts out many times and repeatedly provoked them.

However, the enemy did not follow it and remained on standby.

--- If possible, I wanted to wait a few more days.

If possible, he wanted to drag them into the mountains so he could fight in an advantageous situation. As a mercenary, he always fought when he could secure a more certain position.

--- However, we will starve if we don't fight. Right now, we're like rats that have jumped into a cat's mouth. My subordinates are screaming for revenge, too.

He decided to move his men, whose morale was at its peak.

When he received a report that the soldiers in Belfort returned, Tigre stroked his chest in relief on reflex.

--- We made it in time somehow.

Until now, they had not fought with the band of thieves; however, the enemy was slowly reaching its limit. They would attack tonight or tomorrow.

"Did you bring what I asked for?"

"This should be the required amount."

“I see. Thanks for the hard work.”

Tigre showed his appreciation to the soldier who answered him. The soldier had a smile thick with fatigue. After promising him a reward, he told the man to rest.

He had moved back and forth to Belfort over two days . The soldiers had completely met his expectations.

After checking on the situation, Tigre entered the General's tent to take a nap. After establishing their position, he had worked in shifts with Lim, trying to get as much rest as possible.

As he began to lie down, he kicked something lightly with his toes.

It was a small bag with something light inside. Tigre bent to his knees and picked it up.

“A bear?”

It was a bear doll that fit in the palm of his hand. It was something he knew on sight.

“I believe this was something in our dining room back home... But that was something Teita made...”

“Lord Tigrevurmud, are you still awake---”

At that time, Lim entered the tent while speaking. She had removed her armor. Her sword was at her waist, and she wore a blue, short-sleeved shirt and long boots and gloves.

Tigre looked back immediately. Lim, confused by his actions, noticed what was in Tigre's hand immediately.

For the first time, Tigre saw Lim's face full of emotion.

Her eyes were wide open, and her face was flushed red. She ran up and reached for his hand at a speed Tigre was unable to react to.

Tigre tried to avoid her out of surprise, but he fell to the ground from Lim's momentum and hit the back of his head.

While he let out a groan as the pain assaulted his head, Tigre tried to push the weight that had fallen onto his body. Something soft touched the palm of his hands.

He momentarily forgot his pain. The weight on top of him was the weight of a human.

A sweet fragrance mixed faintly with the smell of sweat tickled Tigre's nose. His body then told him he was in close contact with a human body, and he became aware of her waist and thighs on top of him. Though her body was lean, tight, and devoid of excess flesh, it was still mysteriously soft.

Something was pulled away from his grasp and Lim parted from his body with a speed reminiscent of a beast.

Tigre let out all the air collected in his lungs. He felt relief and self-loathing as he recalled his embarrassment for reacting to her body.

"... You saw it."

Tightly grasping the doll in her right hand, Lim stared at Tigre and breathed roughly. Her face, which rarely showed emotion, was filled with anger and embarrassment.

Tigre understood she was referring to the bear doll in her hands. He took two deep breaths. It seems she did not realize he had touched her breast.

He turned his body around and gazed at Lim.

The two silently watched each other for a while; Tigre eventually recovered from the previous impact and opened his mouth.

“Um... It's fine, isn't it? It's fine that you like bears. I think it's adorable.”

It was not a lie. He simply said what came to his mind first.

Lim said nothing and coldly stared at Tigre with her blue eyes. While wary of the fierce animal before him, Tigre continued to speak.

“Did Teita make that for you?”

“... Yes. Before we left Celesta.”



Their conversation was interrupted at that time.

While looking at the lamp, Tigre was lost in thought. Due to the impact to his head, his drowsiness had been blown away.

Tigre fixed his posture and bowed to Lim.

“I apologize. Though I did not intend to, it did not change the fact that I looked into your belongings."

Lim, unusually, sat in place with a poor expression.

“I cannot simply blame you in such a one sided manner. I should have tightened the string more firmly. You have seen something embarrassing; I am sorry.”

She spoke faster than usual. Though there was a stiffness in her tone and attitude, the atmosphere around her had softened. Tigre smiled in relief.

He did not want her to dislike him, and he wanted to avoid anything awkward before an important battle.

“Um...”

Lim hesitantly looked upward at him.

“About this, please do not tell anyone.”

He did not think it was anything to be embarrassed about. At that time, Tigre thought of something as he saw his bow in the edge of his view.

--- Everyone has something like that.

When he was taken by his father to the King's Capital, he was laughed at for only being able to use the bow. Though it was an amusing story now, he was worried at the time and considered throwing away his bow.

He understood the pain and fear of having what he loved laughed at.

“I understand. I promise not to tell anyone, but---”

His words ended at once as Tigre thought about better words to say. Eventually he continued to speak.

“Regarding what you like, I think you should find someone to talk to about it. You're free to talk to me about it, but I think you can talk to Teita about it, as well. Of course, I don't mind if you talk to anyone else, either.”

Lim's face showed her confusion as she gazed steadily at Tigre. Her calm, blue eyes showed signs of fear.

“Lord Tigrevurmud... Um, do you think it's strange?”

“I think it's surprising.”

Tigre shrugged his shoulders.

“But plenty of people have some unexpected hobbies. For example, Lord Massas was absorbed in divination long ago.”

“Divination?”

“It seems he liked telling fortunes with flowers, horoscopes, cards, and burning bread and other such things. My father told me this many times, since he found it funny.”

A faint smile floated to Lim's mouth as she heard him speak. She could not imagine such a thing from the man she met and spoke to in Alsace.

“It seems he told only my father of his hobby. Since Father's death, Lord Massas has spoken of it only once. Though there are memories I'm sure he would like to

forget, he would not be the same without them, so it's not such a bad thing."

Lim looked down and earnestly listened as she gave thought to Tigre's words. When he finished speaking, she quietly stood up.

"Thank you very much."

With her typical expressionless face regained, she bowed and turned away. After walking a few steps, she turned around.

"A person to talk to... For instance, it would be fine to speak to you, Lord Tigrevurmud?"

Tigre replied to the sudden question with some embarrassment.

"That's fine... but it's not like I know much about stuffed animals, right?"

"But if I talk to you, no one else will know that I like them, right?"

Lim smiled softly as she spoke, which surprised Tigre. As if reading the tension in his mind, Lim continued to speak without changing her expression or tone.

"Also, I will not ask any questions about your touching my body this time."

She noticed.

She left the tent without saying any more while Tigre stood speechless. After she disappeared, he let out a sigh and looked at his right hand.

--- It was big...

His body began reacting again. Tigre hit his head with his right hand several times to admonish himself. Afterward, he finally went to sleep.

When the sun had set, Donalbein burned many bonfires near the castle fort. In the region wrapped in the darkness of the night, the flames could be seen from a distance.

--- They look naïve. I should make it look like a do-or-die situation.

The enemy at the foot of the mountain might not be deceived. Even so, Donalbein would use every trick of the trade to raise every possibility of survival. He had survived until now by doing this.

When midnight arrived, Donalbein ordered his subordinates to leave the base without touching the fires. He was not sure if it would lead to a fire in the forests.

Under the moonless night sky, the band of thieves left the mountain path and walked for a half koku until they reached a river. It was a narrow river, and the water flowed rapidly. It was a winding river which went to the base of the mountains.

They quickly assembled long, slender rafts from logs they prepared beforehand and crossed the river. They moved around behind the Zhcted Army for a night attack.

--- There were signs of them getting reinforcements and more food in these past three days.

Donalbein went down on foot to check the number of people and their weaponry. He found no problems.

There were many bonfires wavering about the Zhcted Army's camp. Donalbein divided his men into two. Sixty people, including himself, were equipped with armor and swords. He left a subordinate to command the rest.

"I'll attack from behind. You take the flank."

They got into position and let out a cry as they attacked the Zhcted Army, all at once. They demolished the fence and got past the trenches before moving on.

However, their onslaught ended immediately.

Not a single soldier remained in the Zhcted Army encampment. There were only sacks filled with soil with branches bound to them, giving the appearance of soldiers holding spears.

--- What...?

His suspicion became anxiety. Donalbein stared at the bonfire, wondering where the tough soldiers had gone to . He found the answer immediately.

A cry was heard from the depths of the darkness. At the same time, dozens of arrows rained down on them.

--- *They have our position!*

Donalbein quaked in anger as he moved between the shadows. They had understood his movements perfectly and took him by surprise.

The Zhcted Army foresaw a nighttime attack and lurked a small distance away.

After the storm of arrows, dazzling swords approached them.

“Calm down!”

The battlefield was wrapped in chaos. Donalbein shouted and pulled out his sword; those close to him recovered from their panic.

The Zhcted soldiers appeared from the darkness and cut his men down in a single blow. Donalbein kicked the nearby torch; it had alerted the enemy of his position.

--- *All we can do is escape to the mountain.*

Donalbein noticed the enemy was not near the Vosyes Mountains before his men were completely enclosed.

"The mountain path! Look at the lights along the mountain! Retreat to the lights!"

It was a simple instruction in this chaos.

Donalbein crossed swords with several more Zhcted soldiers as he and his men escaped in the confusion.

He could still fight if he could reorganize.

The narrow mountain path would reduce the advantage of numbers, and he could meet the enemy from a higher vantage point. The Zhcted soldiers would be sure to follow.

The fires spread as the tents began to burn, and a smoke began to float above them. Donalbein pushed on, roaring and scolding his men.

They managed to escape; they could see the mountain path.

In that moment, a frightful cry was heard, and wings flapped about them.

In the shadow of the mountain, against the darkness of the night sky, innumerable birds covered the view of Donalbein and his men.

They could not understand what happened with either their eyes or their ears. Many stood petrified, others cowered and let loose queer sounds. Even Donalbein looked on with wide eyes.

However, the people behind him did not stop. The two groups collided, and screams were heard in the air. The confusion only accelerated.

Even with the mountain path before their eyes, their movements were completely sealed.

“Let's use the pigeons.”

Three days ago, Tigre made the proposal to Lim.

They had procured two to three hundred pigeons from Belfort and tied their necks together so they could not fly away. Ten soldiers then lurked along the mountain path.

When the thieves approached, they would release the strings, freeing the pigeons. Though they would fly away in fright immediately due to the sounds of the battlefield, they cried out for good measure.

With only ten soldiers, they were able to force the enemy to stop.

While hundreds of pigeons flying up all at once would quickly spread out, it was a narrow path on a moonless night. Though only for a moment, the pigeons flew away like a storm.

Tigre saw the effect before him.

While the thieves were petrified, the Zhcted soldiers charged forward with sword and spear, stricking them easily, as if they were simply mud dolls. One bandit after another was either killed or ran away.

The screams were lost in the darkness of the night. Bodies were piled upon each other, and the cold ground was covered in blood. It was too one-sided to be called combat.

Amongst them, there was one shadow which pushed the Zhcted soldiers away. It was Donalbein.

Donalbein protected his face with both hands while running to the left and right. The soldiers followed after him, shooting arrow after arrow. The bandit leader did not flinch in the slightest and continued moving his legs.

Tigre quietly nocked an arrow and drew his bow. The bowstring trembled shortly after.

The arrow pierced through the gap in his fingers, between his eyes, and penetrated through the back of his head.

The soldiers raised a voice of admiration seeing this feat in the darkness.

Those who knew of Donalbein's death gave up immediately. They threw away their arms and surrendered on bended knees.

The bandits were completely swept away.

The Zhcted Army returned to Belfort two days after annihilating the bandits. It had taken time to return the kidnapped women and money to the villages.

The thieves who had surrendered followed behind them in neat rows.

They were defeated and scattered, and their leader had been lost. They no longer possessed the energy or violence they had during the night raid. They were but empty husks, obediently following directions.

Behind them, there were many carts piled with treasure they had stolen and the armor they had used.

The residents of the town watched with bated breath as they saw the Zhcted Army march through the towns.

The streets soon became crowded.

The presence of the bandits hiding in the Vosyes Mountains was a source of anxiety. The defeat of Viscount Augre's army further strengthened their unease .

The Zhcted Army, under the Black Zirnitra Dragon Flag returned in triumph. The residents welcomed them with roaring applause.

Of the two at the front, Tigre smiled with a mixture of tension as he waved to the citizens. Lim hid her face within her helmet and advanced in silence.

“You won't wave, Lim? You did take care of the bandits...”

When Tigre asked while responding to the cheers, Lim sighed within her helmet.

“I would rather not have my face seen here, and there are many who deserve recognition. Also---”

Lim continued with a softer tone.

“You have performed a distinguished service. If not for your plan, the fight would only have become prolonged. You should be more proud of yourself.”

When they reached the mansion, Tigre delivered the bandits to Augre. They were put in a prison with the punishment of labor and were promised release after enough service.

Rather than the Viscount's room, they were in a large hall.

There was a table in the center of the room which seated ten and a large fireplace in the wall. The Viscount wore dark silk clothing and greeted Tigre.

When Tigre and the others sat down, a maid entered and poured cold wine in cups of silver.

Before the toast, Augre bowed deeply toward two people.

“Earl Vorn. Limlisha. As governor of Territoire, I wish to sincerely express my gratitude. They grew to power

due to my negligence. I apologize for the trouble I have caused you."

"Above all else, the peace of your people has been protected."

Tigre bowed his head in assent with a smile as his elder bowed again in gratitude.

"As expected of the Zhcted Army. You managed to overcome the bandits who had double the number as well as the geographical advantage. Really, Earl Vorn, you must have good fortune to obtain such reliable allies."

"... The victory is Lord Tigrevurmud's alone. He bravely led the troops. That is all there was to it."

Lim's words contained small thorns. Tigre looked away involuntarily. Augre, taking notice of her mood, smiled bitterly and waved his hands.

"I see. It seems Earl Vorn is trusted by Zhcted."

Lim realized her subconscious irritation hearing the old Viscount's words.

"I apologize for speaking out of hand."

While immediately apologizing, Lim was puzzled in the back of her mind.

Augre's words were in no way strange. Though a bit exaggerated, the problem of the bandits was not one he could solve, no matter how he thought about it. Lim's confusion ended in a moment as she recalled why she was angry.

--- It is because he seemed to be ignoring Lord Tigrevurmud.

Tigre had never fully relied on the Zhcted Army, and he was willing to put his life at risk if need be. Lim was fully aware of that.

--- I see... If I think of how things will be for Eleanora-sama in the future, it would be no good if Lord Tigrevurmud is simply seen as a decoration.

That is why she said her words. Lim convinced herself.

Augre looked at Lim, as if he had seen something interesting, as she thought to herself with her typical deadpan expression. He then turned around to Tigre.

“Earl Vorn. If you are satisfied with my old bones, then I will gladly lend you my strength. The soldiers of Territoire will fight with you, and I will do what I can to persuade the surrounding aristocrats to ally themselves with you. Though there are not many people, I should be able to acquire one thousand men for you.”

Tigre's face brightened and he bowed deeply in silence . Though he could say no words in his joy, his gratitude was firmly felt by Augre. The old Viscount shook with laughter.

“There is no need for that. This much is natural for taking care of the bandits. Besides, I have sworn fealty to the King. I cannot stand by as people suffer under Thenardier and Ganelon's rule. As soon as I have completed my preparations, my son and I will rally beneath your flag.”

Tigre bowed once again toward Augre whose smile was full of the will to fight. He had finally obtained an ally other than Massas' troops and the Zhcted Army.

After politely showing his gratitude, Tigre and the others resigned from the Viscount's room.

Zirnitra

Under the Black Dragon Flag, the Zhcted Army marched along the road back to Alsace. Tigre rode at the front while cheerfully humming.

“Lord Tigrevurmud.”

Lim advanced next to him and abruptly handed a paper to him.

“Though it is fine to be happy, please do not forget this .”

“I understand. This is about the war expenditures, right?”

Having his good mood disturbed, Tigre felt a little annoyed. He skimmed through the papers and stopped after seeing a certain notation.

“... Three hundred pigeons?”

“They were returned to the wild. It is necessary we make amends.”

“I suppose there is no discount for its effectiveness?”

“When you fight with thousands or tens of thousands of troops, such things are simply a trap. If I were to give you a discount, it would be a failure on my part as the person in charge of war expenditures.”

Lim spoke indifferently. Tigre drooped his shoulders and returned the papers. Lim received them and took a pen from the saddle.

“However... You slayed the leader, Donalbein. I will not be able to do this in the future, so just this once, our army will bear this cost. I will tell Eleanora-sama.”

While saying this, Lim placed a line through the notation with her pen. Tigre looked at her in surprise.

“Is that really okay?”

“It will only be this time. I think it is good enough that you understand the importance of the price of war and how quickly it builds up.”

“You've saved me.”

He spoke sincerely.

“--- Now then, it is time for your lectures.”

Lecture. Tigre had a small headache hearing the word. They were now teacher and pupil.

“... I'm going to teach you about the bears I have in Zhcted.”

Her voice contained an out-of-character shyness.

Tigre blinked and then looked intently at Lim.

Her face had turned red. He smiled wryly and matched Lim's gaze before nodding.

“Please do so, Teacher.”

Michelia
Snow Princess of the Frozen Wave

Tigre felt nostalgic when he saw the town of Celesta.

“I wonder if Ellen has returned.”

While recalling her bright smile, Tigre spoke to Lim who rode her horse alongside him.

“She is likely to have returned, since we took more time than expected.”

At that time, Teita and Batran, who were behind them, hastened their pace and approached Tigre.

“Tigre-sama, may I go ahead to make preparations?”

“I'm sure you're tired from the long journey. Don't worry about it today.”

Though Teita's eyes were as full of life as always, they were slightly puffy and sunken. Her fatigue had accumulated as well.

“Teita. It's good that you have offered, but you don't need to do anything unreasonable.”

Teita frowned in embarrassment as Tigre put in his own good word.

“But what will we do about supper tonight, Tigre-sama?”

“I'll finish off what I have.”

“... You're going to eat only fruits and vegetables again ?”

Tigre's response was blocked as she gazed at him with her hazel eyes. She hit the bull's-eye.

“Teita, it's natural to do these things when you're hunting in the mountains and forests---”

“We are at a village.”

Teita's words were quick and blunt. Batran smiled wryly to help Tigre.

“Teita, you must return to the temple tonight for prayer. I'll worry about you if you're out too late.”

Teita was weak to her shrine duties. Her momentum quickly disappeared as she looked down in thought. Tigre stroked her chestnut-hair as if soothing a child.

“It will be a while before we can relax. Tomorrow will be busy, so I'll need your help. Make sure to get some rest today.”

“... I understand. I apologize for being unreasonable, Tigre-sama.”

Teita and Batran moved back. Tigre let out a breath of relief.

“Teita is a good girl.”

Lim expressed her thoughts.

“But she can be troublesome from time to time.”

Tigre remembered when Celesta was attacked. Teita, in order to welcome him home, had not left the house.

“Though I'm glad she thinks of me, it's a bit troublesome that she would put herself in such danger.”

"I suppose it is persuasive coming from someone who tried to run away for the sake of his people."

Tigre frowned upon hearing Lim's cold words.

"I have a duty as their Lord..."

"For her, she has her pride as a maid and her affection for you. Even if it is dangerous, even if it is foolish to others, it is still her obligation."

"How difficult."

Tigre looked up at the sky and let out a sigh.

Contrary to Tigre's expectations, Ellen still had not returned.

However, a courier was sent from Ellen and awaited him at the mansion. Her message was short.

[I'll meet you at Kikimora Mansion.]

"Kikimora Mansion?"

Lim answered Tigre's question.

"It is one of Eleanora-sama's villas in the Vosyes Mountains."

"A villa."

Tigre was surprised to hear it, but it would not be unfounded if she were to have ten or twenty villas, given Ellen's position.

The aristocrats of Brune typically had two or more villas in addition to their own mansions within their territory. Several years ago, Massas invited Tigre and his father over to his own.

The next morning, Tigre and Lim left Celesta on horseback under the glow of the early morning sky.

Though Teita likely wanted to go with them, she may have thought it a nuisance on her part, so she saw the two off with a smile.

Rurick remained on standby with the one hundred soldiers from Zhcted in Celesta.

There was a purpose in this. If aristocrats close to Duke Thenardier noticed the Zhcted Army, they would not move immediately.

Though the Knights were still worrisome, for now, he could only worry about Massas who had headed toward the Royal Capital.

--- Zaien called me a traitor. If you consider the current situation in which the Zhcted Army is remaining in Alsace, others will think so as well, however, if we give him an explanation, His Majesty should understand.

Tigre could do nothing but believe.

After crossing the Vosyes Mountains and entering LeitMeritz, Lim took the lead. They took a road separate from the highway and moved through a prairie.

"Autumn has already ended."

The cold wind blew the leaves off the trees. Lim muttered to herself as she returned a hempen bag to the saddle of her horse.

The meadow soon changed to a wilderness, and then into an area full of gravel and pebbles, in which weeds could hardly grow. A large black building stood at the top of a hill.

"This is Kikimora Mansion."

"Incidentally, is Kikimora the name of something?"

"It is said to be a fairy from ancient times that grants households safety and protection. Unless an elaborate title is given intentionally, most villas are crowned with this name."

As they climbed up the small incline, the shape of the villa became clear to see.

From top to bottom, the walls were plastered and dyed black. The roof was red, and it was about the size of Tigre's mansion in Celesta.

When they arrived at the front of the house, Lim pulled her horse to the stable to the side. Tigre quietly followed after her.

In the stable, there was already a horse tethered. The horse glanced at Tigre with large, round eyes. As its interest quickly disappeared, it turned away and snorted.

"This is Eleanora-sama's horse."

Lim let out a breath of relief and looked back to Tigre.

“Lord Tigrevurmud, please go ahead. If you call Eleanora-sama's name, I believe she will come to you.”

“It's fine. We won't start the conversation until you're there anyway, so we should take care of this quickly.”

After unloading his luggage, he pulled off the harness and saddle. He wiped its body and gave the horse salt to lick and water to drink. It was work the two were accustomed to, so it ended quickly.

Tigre carried Lim's bag over his shoulder; it was quite a considerable weight. After Tigre left the stable, Lim quickly followed after him in confusion.

“Since it belongs to me, I should take it.”

“I have my things as well, and we'll be there in a moment, anyway.”

Tigre laughed and told her not to worry. Lim sighed with complicated emotions showing in her blue eyes.

Standing before the front door, Lim lightly knocked. Footsteps were soon heard and the door opened. Ellen appeared wearing her blue colored clothes and the Silver Flash Arifal at her waist.

"Oh, you came."

Her dazzling smile reminiscent of the sun beyond a cloudless sky invited Tigre and Lim. The light of a lamp could be seen high on the wall, illuminating the three people.

"Looks pretty heavy."

Ellen voiced her admiration having seen the bag over Tigre's shoulder.

"Though I would not call it a souvenir, it is something I want you to see by all means."

"It will be my pleasure."

Ellen's bright red pupils shined curiously as she listened to Lim's words. At that time, the air shook buoyantly, and the wind passed through Tigre and Lim's hair.

"It seems this fellow wants to say hello to you as well."

Ellen lightly and fondly tapped the longsword at her waist. It was as if the Silver Flash was laughing.

“Hmm?”

Her silver-white hair which extended to her waist shook. Ellen looked at Tigre's face in interest.

“Is there something on my face?”

“No, it's the opposite.”

Ellen smiled in satisfaction and extended her slender arm to Tigre's head. She brought his face close enough that they could feel each others' breath.

Feeling her soft chest press against his own, Tigre's face faintly turned crimson. Ellen continued speaking without noticing his reaction.

“When I left Alsace, it felt like you were possessed. I don't know what happened, but it's not there now.”

Tigre understood that his expression was poor at the time. When Ellen left, he had been obsessed with his fear of Duke Thenardier.

Tigre looked back at Ellen and returned a bold smile.

“Everything's fine because it's me.”

“Right. Also, doesn't it seem like you and Lim have become quite friendly?”

This time, Ellen's smile had a bit of an edge to it.

“You two were alone from Alsace to here. Did something happen?”

“Unfortunately, it was nothing like you imagine.”

While shrugging his shoulders, Tigre gently removed Ellen's arms. After they parted, he regretted the loss of the good feeling he had, but he also felt it unpleasant and different from his true intent. He still had a lump in his throat from the nostalgia of their reunion, but after some time, it seemed to reflect poorly on his behavior.

“You two seem quite intimate now.”

Though Ellen's words showed her suspicion, she did not pursue the subject any further.

Ellen then walked over to Lim and hugged her closely. Lim also smiled naturally as she patted Ellen's back.

“You've worked hard.”

“We have not done much. I am glad you are well, Eleanora-sama.”

“That's natural. I just went to the King's Capital, had a chat, and came here. Let's relax and have a chat.”

Ellen cheerfully responded as she guided the two through the hallway to the living room.

“This is quite clean. Do you use it often?”

Tigre gave his impression as he passed through the corridor. Ellen turned around and looked at him.

“About a half koku on horseback, there is a small town called Rodnick. The residents there clean this mansion regularly. Tonight, we'll be staying here.”

The living room was spacious and had a large fireplace along the wall.

The carpet from Muozinel had geometric patterns sewn into it, giving it a warm appearance. On top of a walnut table in the center, there was a bottle of wine and a fruit basket.

Suddenly, Tigre recalled a story Ellen had once told him. Everyone drew together, huddling over the fireplace, singing songs, and eating warm potatoes. Like that, people could overcome the severe winter snowfall.

“First, a toast to celebrate our reunion.”

The three sat around the table. Ellen opened the wine and poured it into three prepared glasses. They brought their glasses together and gave toasts in both the language of Brune and Zhcted.

“Why did you choose this place as a meeting spot?”

Tigre asked as he admired the scenery outside the window. There was a garden, and the field spread away from the mansion, giving it an idyllic atmosphere.

“Honestly, I wasn't sure what was going on anywhere. If there was an issue in Alsace, I could head there, and if there were a problem in LeitMeritz, I could travel there immediately as well. This place is roughly the midpoint between the two.”

After answering with a bright smile, Ellen looked at the two seriously.

“I'll say this now, I managed to obtain the King's permission for the time being, but there are two troublesome issues. When I obtain any territory, I must offer it to the Kingdom.”

“How does that differ from now?”

Tigre tilted his head, unable to understand Ellen's words.

“Alsace will be under the direct control of Zhcted Kingdom, not Eleanora-sama. Alsace will be under His Majesty's control.”

Lim answered his question. Tigre simply put his hand to his chin in thought.

“... Does the King of Zhcted not want Ellen's territory to increase?”

“It is not just territory, even our popularity, authority, and influence... The old man is afraid whenever any of these things increase. He is a King that fears the Vanadis. Well, it's happened with all the previous Kings.”

Lim continued to speak for Ellen, who had let out a large sigh.

“Lord Tigrevurmud. Assume you are the King of a country... There are seven people with power and authority second only to yourself. Would you want them to obtain more land to control? Furthermore, these seven are popular and excellent in domestic affairs.”

“I would leave the work to them and take a nap or go hunt.”

Lim hit Tigre without hesitation.

“I am telling a very serious story, so please answer seriously.”

Ellen was lying on the table suppressing her laughter.

“... Well, aren't they reliable?”

“Would you not fear the seven would turn their blade against you? They wield a strength greater than one thousand soldiers. No matter what, it would be impossible for you to win.”

"I would think it best to have an excellent subordinate, even if they were stronger than me, for a long time."

Hearing Tigre's ridiculous answer, Ellen looked up happily.

"Honestly, even I would say you were a bit too carefree. I said this before, but the King is not like that. He is a timid man who fears us, even when we have small military services. He gets angry and attempts to confiscate any extra territory we receive."

"--- So that's why he's seizing Alsace."

Tigre groaned. The future of Alsace had become more uncertain.

Though Tigre did not know how Ellen governed her lands in detail, he had strolled about the town beneath the castle with her.

The town was lively, the peace was not bad, and the people seemed happy. He could feel at ease leaving his land to her or Lim.

"That is a separate issue for now, though."

Ellen began laughing in encouragement after seeing Tigre's serious expression.

“The fight has just begun, and the situation can change drastically. Just make sure you keep that in mind.”

Tigre pulled himself together and bowed in thanks.

“The second issue is a bit troublesome... The King said, [First and foremost, act in Zhcted's national interests and refrain from taking rash actions].”

“Isn't that normal?”

Tigre did not understand why it was troublesome.

“It's a bit difficult to explain since you're honest to a fault.”

Ellen laughed as she teased Tigre.

“I do not believe this could be avoidable, since Lord Tigrevurmud has not become as perverse as Eleanora-sama.”

Lim talked down to her Lord with a straight face; Ellen's mouth sharpened in response.

"... What kind of wind is blowing now? You're protecting Tigre."

"I am simply admonishing my superior."

After silencing Ellen with her prompt response, Lim turned to Tigre.

"The problem comes from His Majesty's words. When thinking of national interests, any noble, for instance, those with connections to Duke Thenardier who might benefit should the Duke reign victorious, could rush into action."

"... So it's left open to interpretation?"

Tigre began to make the connection.

"He said that specifically because it was open to interpretation."

Ellen spoke ill words of the King of her country in a bad mood.

"However, aristocrats have little significance. Below the King, there are the seven Vanadis. The aristocrats are even further below, followed by the normal citizens."

"So you mean there will be problems with the other Vanadis?"

Tigre's words held tension. Ellen nodded earnestly.

"There are Vanadis with connections to Thenardier and Ganelon. Usually fights between Vanadis are forbidden, but they will be tolerated under these circumstances."

"Can you move in a situation like that?"

It was different from the time she helped him in Alsace . Ellen had attracted attention and could no longer vacate her territory recklessly.

"Though not all Vanadis are allies, they are not necessarily enemies, either. For now, we need watch only one. If possible, I would like to get rid of her beforehand. I would rather not worry about having my movements cut off in the future."

"This sounds serious."

Tigre smiled as he shrugged his shoulders.

It was a serious situation, and it would be difficult to take care of the matter. Ellen called Tigre to the mansion and told him the story to confirm his determination.

Tigre decided he would remain calm and respond to the situation. If he showed fear at this point in time, he had no qualification to be standing by her side.

The Vanadis of silver-white hair gently manipulated the wind and smiled joyfully.

“I've told you my story. It's about time you tell me yours.”

Tigre nodded and told her he obtained Massas Rodant and Viscount Augre's cooperation, as well as the subjugation of the bandits.

“I believe in Lord Massas. He is my father's best friend , and when I was held captive, he ran about trying to help me. I also believe Viscount Augre is trustworthy.”

“Lim, what do you think?”

Ellen turned her bright red pupils to her expressionless adjutant.

"I believe we can trust Earl Rodant. As for Viscount Augre, so long as there is no discord between him and Lord Tigrevurmud, there will be no problems. By the way, there is something I wish for you to see, Eleanora-sama."

When Lim said this, the sound of a bell could be heard from the door. Someone was standing there.

"... Nobody should know I'm here."

Ellen frowned suspiciously.

"I will look."

When Lim stood quietly and left her seat, Tigre restarted the conversation. He placed the contents of the hempen bag on the floor.

It was metallic armor. Though there were various scratches, it was still like new. It would be possible to sell it if carefully polished.

"The band of thieves in the Vosyes Mountains had a lot of this, though their helmets and gauntlets were similar to those used in Alsace."

Ellen stood and walked around the table while observing the armor.

“--- These are made in Olmutz.”

“Lim thought the possibility of that is high. So it really is from there?”

Ellen snorted and pointed to an inconspicuous place inside the armor, along the flank. There was a strange pattern stamped there.

“This is an imitation to the God of War, Triglav. No mistakes about it.”

Ellen released the armor and smiled sarcastically while folding her arms.

“It's some expensive stuff from Olmutz.”

The surface of the armor reflected the light shining through the window.

“Though I hate to say it, she's in our country as well. The manufacturing method is unique, and the armor is hard and light. Even if it was worn out and full of scratches, those thieves would be penniless.”

"Where is Olmutz in Zhcted?"

Tigre had only heard its name from Lim. He knew nothing else about it.

"It is the Dukedom to the south of LeitMeritz."

Tigre was surprised to hear her ill-tempered voice as Ellen responded. She immediately drank the wine in her glass and hit the table vigorously.

Though Tigre thought the conversation would be unsavory, he knew it was unavoidable.

"The territory is governed by a Vanadis?"

"Her name is Ludmira Lurie... She's completely different from me."

Ellen distorted her beautiful face with her hatred.

"She's a noisy person who always talks about character and courtesy, and she always carries tea and jam at her waist. That girl's like a young potato."

Though Tigre could not possibly understand her words, he knew she was insulting the other person.

"--- I cannot possibly stay silent, now. Who exactly is a potato!"

Suddenly, the door was flung open and a girl's angry voice echoed throughout the room. Tigre looked back and saw two girls standing there.

One was Lim, who appeared tired. The other was a strange, diminutive girl.

She was breathtaking and was a beauty different from Ellen.

Her blue hair was trimmed around her shoulder, and she wore a large, white ribbon. Her blue silk clothes wrapped about her delicate body, giving her a lovely appearance.

However, rather than her beauty, it was her strength that appeared most. Her powerful gaze remained firm in his memory.

Tigre's gaze moved from her charming eyes to the short spear in her hand.

The tip looked to be made of the highest purity of ice; it created an illusion of coldness.

“--- Lim.”

Ellen's voice was tinged with a violent rage that reverberated within Tigre's ear.

“Why did you permit this woman to step inside this building?”

“She is a Vanadis. I cannot possibly turn her away.”

Like a lifeless doll, Lim responded indifferently.

“... Vanadis?”

The girl with blue hair shifted her gaze to Tigre as he squeezed words out of his mouth. Her smile was the height of arrogance, and she stretched her chest forward and spoke haughtily.

“I am one of the proud Vanadis of Zhcted, the Master of the [Spear of Evil Death (Hajya no Zankaku)], Ludmira Lurie.”

“Leave.”

Ellen's voice was cold and held no forgiveness. The atmosphere of the peaceful living room had become dangerous in an instant. The two Vanadis clearly aimed their hostility toward each other, like fierce animals confronting their natural enemy.

Ludmira glared at Ellen, her blue eyes full of contempt .

“You are being quite rude to your guest, Eleanora.”

Ellen lifted the corner of her eye as she responded with undisguised hostility.

“I will take the appropriate attitude toward a guest I invite. At the very least, you could bring a gift, though I doubt I would be of mind to accept you as a visitor.”

“You should apologize for insulting all humans and potatoes.”

“You should prostrate before me for having eavesdropped on our conversation.”

Tigre stood quietly from his seat and carefully stepped away so as not to attract attention. He walked to the doorway near Lim.

"Eavesdropping? Your voice is foolishly loud."

"If you think that was loud, then you live in quite a small world. How pitiful."

"Even if I live in a small world, I have many things, unlike you."

"Rather than having many things, you should hurry up and gain some height and bigger breasts."

"I am 16. There is still room enough to grow. How about you, Eleanora? Are you working hard to maintain the minimum dignity and courtesy? You should do your best from now until you grow old and die."

The sound of grinding teeth could be heard, though it was unclear from which Vanadis the sound originated.

Though Tigre looked to ask Lim for help, Lim appeared to be asking him the same thing.

"... Are these two always like this?"

"It has been this way since they first met. They exchanged many insults and pointed their

[Dragonic Tool] at one another. You would not think they belong to the same country."

"I see. So how do we stop this?"

"Though I have an idea of who can stop it, she is too far away. We can only leave these two until they finish."

Lim's expression clearly showed resignation and an unusual fatigue.

Tigre stirred his dull red hair and steeled his resolve.

--- I'm not sure how easy it will be to get along with this girl.

However, he still had something to ask Ludmira.

Tigre pulled out a chair close to him, purposely making a loud noise.

Seizing the moment, while their verbal war was interrupted, Tigre stood between Ludmira and Ellen.

"I do not believe I have introduced myself yet. My name is Tigrevurmud Vorn."

Though he smiled awkwardly, he presented his hand to Ludmira.

Ludmira glanced at his hand and then looked up, as if appraising Tigre.

“Tigre. This woman is not a guest. There's no need to receive her.”

Ellen spoke defiantly behind him. Tigre was troubled as his hand still remained before him.

“--- I suppose so. I am certainly not a guest.”

She muttered in a voice so small, even Tigre could not hear it. Ludmira turned away and spoke over her shoulder.

“Please come with me, Earl Tigrevurmud Vorn.”

Though Tigre and Lim were surprised by her words, Ellen was the one to react most strongly. She stood up angrily from her chair and pushed it over.

“Wha... You, what do you want!?”

Ludmira responded calmly after seeing Ellen's unexpectedly red face.

“I have come here to meet this man. Though I was going to Alsace, I remembered your villa and dropped by.”

“What business do you have with me?”

The caution in Tigre's voice was muffled as he asked.

“It is nothing spectacular. I simply wish to speak a little. Is that a problem?”

“Hold it.”

It was not Tigre but Ellen who responded. She stood next to Tigre and stomped on the floor before glaring at Ludmira.

“This guy's mine. I decide what he does.”

“Oh? Were you not employed by Earl Vorn?”

Ellen found herself at a loss for words. The edge of her mouth had cramped up as she desperately thought of what to say. Tigre decided to help her.

“Our relationship is closer to that of equals. I am showing my respect as her employer.”

Ludmira accepted the answer for the time being. She then turned toward Ellen and smiled aggressively.

“Though you said you wished to talk, is it not possible to do so here?”

“As Eleanora has said, I am not a guest. Also, I would like to speak without others hearing our conversation, if possible.”

Tigre looked at Ellen. After seeing Tigre and Ludmira with a sour face, Ellen sighed.

“Let's move then. It's a bit before schedule, but let's go to Rodnick.”

They left the household and rode their horses down a slope. Beneath the empty sky was a vast, flat meadow.

Ellen and Lim led the way with Tigre and Ludmira following afterward. It was done this way because Ellen and Ludmira clearly did not want to be near each other.

It was Lim's job to calm Ellen down, leaving Tigre next to the blue-haired Vanadis.

“What is it you wish to ask of me?”

Having been asked bluntly, Ludmira was lost in thought for a moment before turning to Tigre.

“I wish to know the reason why you are fighting Duke Thenardier.”

Tigre was taken aback. He looked intently at Ludmira's face involuntarily; he did not know why he was asked.

As they moved forward, Tigre explained how Duke Thenardier's army attacked Alsace. When Tigre pushed them back, Zaien had been killed.

“I think it a natural thing that I protected Alsace, but I don't think Duke Thenardier will withdraw.”

“Do you have a chance of winning?”

“That... I don't know.”

Tigre was unsure. Even with Ellen, Massas, and Augre by his side, he could not be certain.

“I do not think it is possible for you to win against Duke Thenardier.”

The plains were interrupted by the wilderness as they moved away from the residence. Ludmira continued as she watched Ellen's back.

“Duke Thenardier has many allies both inside and outside the country. I am one of them.”

“... Will you bring your army into Brune like Ellen?”

“If I judge it to be necessary.”

However, Ludmira's white ribbon moved as she shook her head.

“Simply leading an army is not the only form of cooperation. Money, food, armor, information... I can help simply by sending those. Even public statements may influence public opinions. Do you have such allies?”

Tigre could not answer. Though he was not without allies, the difference in numbers was too large.

Ludmira sighed ostentatiously while Tigre remained silent. She looked up at him with contempt in her eyes.

--- *Those eyes.*

They were the reason Tigre could not get a good impression of the Vanadis with blue hair as she quarreled with Ellen.

“Do you look at everyone like that?”

Though Tigre tried to suppress his feelings as much as possible, they still leaked from his voice. Ludmira's eyes narrowed quickly, tinged with a cold hostility.

“... Though informal, this is the first time a man has insulted me on our first meeting.”

“I have also never met a person who has neglected her self-introduction for such a long time.”

Tigre responded with a joke as he feigned ignorance.

He felt as if a sword or spear was pointed to his chest. Tigre looked back at Ludmira as a cold sweat wet his palm.

After a time, Ludmira looked downward quietly.

"--- I suppose so. It is as you say."

Ludmira bowed in apology, surprising Tigre.

This girl had shown a coercive attitude since she first appeared in the residence.

She was aggressive and looked and spoke to others in contempt. He would never think she would apologize.

"I will say this. You should not call me so poorly. Call me Lurie-sama."

Ludmira smiled lightly as if it were a natural thing.

"... Is it good to speak so formally to someone who might become an enemy?"

"You should correct how you speak."

The Vanadis with blue hair made that declaration to Tigre with a strong tone. Tigre felt a strong pressure which made speaking difficult as she stared at him with her pupils of frozen jasper.

"You are an Earl of this country, and I am a Vanadis. Under normal circumstances, you would not be permitted to ride your horse next to me."

Tigre could not conceal his embarrassment. He tilted his head and ran his hand through his red hair.

Though he did not think she was angry, after thinking about it, he knew she was correct.

--- The Vanadis kneel only to the King, according to that story.

Applying this to Brune Kingdom, the Vanadis would correspond to the powerful aristocrats like Thenardier and Ganelon, and individuals in positions such as Prime Minister, Grand Chamberlain, and Generals.

She was certainly far above a country aristocrat like Tigre.

--- I guess I'm too used to Ellen.

Ellen was special. He needed to remember that.

Tigre, seeing Ludmira's sincere expression, bowed obediently.

“I apologize; however, would you pardon me if I call you Ludmira-sama? For someone from Brune, it is much easier to say.”

It was true. Ludmira did not answer Tigre immediately and looked at Ellen's back. For an instant, there was a hint of envy and loneliness in her profile.

“... So you call Eleanora, Ellen?”

Rather than asking him a question, she was muttering to herself.

“I will allow it since our association will be short. Also, what is it you wished to say about my eyes?”

Tigre spoke informally as he normally did but corrected himself in a panic.

“You look down on others.”

It was not an assumption. He could say that with certainty.

Tigre had been the recipient of such eyes on countless occasions. The powerful aristocrats and their sons, Zaien included, the women of the court, and the Knights all made light of the bow.

“Can you simply smile and look favorably on poorly made meals or terribly drawn paintings?”

Ludmira spoke as if she were amused.

“So you think it natural to despise and humiliate people of poor character?”

“... I do. At least, for those of high standing.”

Ludmira looked away as she gave him an answer. The Vanadis with the spear continued to speak.

“Earl Vorn. I have heard of you before. You are a person with little skill with weaponry. Before, you presented your hand to me. It was clearly not of someone who wields the spirit of either the sword or the spear. Though your bow arm may be good, the sword and

spear are what is valued. Your skill has no meaning in Brune."

Tigre scratched his head in silence. It is true he lived a life unrelated to fame or military services.

"You have nothing worth mentioning. Dignity, charm, respect, even something odd, I have felt nothing from you. Though Eleanora has become your ally... I cannot understand why. What on earth did you say to her?"

Tigre finally understood. This Vanadis was interested in him.

"I want you to lend me your strength. That is all I said."

Because it was not a lie, Tigre was able to answer naturally. Also, since he had been insulted, he decided to go on the counter-offensive a little.

"Even if there were something else, do you think I would tell someone who might become my enemy? This is even more true for a childish girl who can barely tolerate a small insult and starts an argument in someone else's house."

"You can assume that it is."

"... You are quite skillful with your words."

Ludmira smiled. It was approximately 10% praise, with the remainder being contempt. She looked up at Tigre with eyes as if she were absolutely superior.

"By the way, I also had a question I wished to ask."

Tigre spoke of the band of thieves they had subjugated in the Vosyes Mountains and mentioned they wore armor from Olmutz.

"According to Ellen, you are the one governing Olmutz."

"Do you wish to say that I organized the thieves and sent them?"

She looked at him differently from before. An intense anger emitted from her petite body.

--- *She's unexpectedly temperamental.*

"No, that's not quite right. I thought you might know who sold it, since the armor was so new."

"That is impossible."

Ludmira answered in a fit of anger, throwing him off.

"Though it takes time and effort, we make a large quantity of them. Both aristocrats and merchants purchase them, as well as people from other countries such as Brune and Muozinel, and even the distant lands like Sachstein and Asvarre. You should not think we are on the same scale as Alsace."

Her words were effective, completely silencing Tigre.

Soon afterward, Tigre and the others reached Rodnick.

Rodnick, rather than a town, gave the impression of a large village.

There was nothing around the town but wilderness, and it was far from the main roads.

Though a large river flowed through the center of the town, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The wall surrounding the village was made of stones piled up to waist height, and the fence simply consisted of logs of wood.

The soil was hardened, and the weeds were removed. Small pebbles lay scattered about the street like any other road. The houses were simple with walls made of wood covered in plaster and thatched roofs.

Though there were a few stalls along the main street, they could easily be counted.

"This place has nothing."

"If you think so, then leave. I will gladly send you off."

Ludmira muttered her impression in a boring manner as she walked along with her horse. Ellen responded, clearly showing her displeasure.

--- It certainly does seem like Ludmira says, but it doesn't feel poor or deserted.

"Is there something in this town?"

Leaving the two Vanadis, Tigre spoke to Lim.

"Why do you think so?"

"I don't understand how the people have enough to eat. There are few fields in the surroundings, and the

roads are far away, so they shouldn't have much business.”

The housewives amused themselves by gathering at the stalls and chatting, and the smiles of the children running between houses were bright and carefree.

Men amused themselves with chess in the gardens, and, though antiquated, there were many children sitting on their knees, listening to the elderly tell a story.

Though it was not flashy or loud, everyone seemed happy. It was an atmosphere Tigre enjoyed.

“It looks like you did a good job of noticing, Tigre. As expected of my partner who differs from a certain small Vanadis.”

Hearing Tigre's words, Ellen turned around and laughed joyfully.

“There is a hot spring here. That's why I brought you here.”

“Aren't hot springs in the heart of the mountain? Don't you often see deer and monkeys...”

Lim looked at Tigre with amazement and corrected him.

“They are not necessarily limited to the heart of the mountains.”

“For this town, they were digging for a well but found a hot spring instead. It's over there.”

Ellen pointed to a distant building made of stone. Its size was the same as Ellen's villa, though it likely extended twice as far. The roof was flat and was particularly conspicuous for the town.

“It's a public bath. There are three areas, each with a hot water pipe to allow the water to flow in. Also...”

At that time, Ellen's words were interrupted as she turned her gaze to a nearby stall. The smell drifted to Tigre's nose; it was a stall which sold wheat porridge.

--- That’s right, we haven’t eaten anything since this morning, and it’s pretty late.

“Should we get a bite to eat?”

Ellen seemed to have trouble making the proposal, so Tigre spoke up for her. Tigre was also hungry.

“Yeah, you're right. Let's do that.”

Though Ellen nodded and grinned widely like a child, Ludmira spoke shrilly as she looked at Ellen in astonishment.

“There is no need. As a Vanadis, I will not eat at a street stall... Even so, I am not hungry.”

As she said that, Ludmira's stomach gave off a sound. Though it was quiet, neither Tigre, Ellen, nor Lim missed it.

Lim looked away as if she had not heard it; however, Ellen's shoulders shook as she held in her laughter. She looked down at Ludmira with an unbearably happy face.

“I see. The great Vanadis Ludmira-sama could not possibly eat wheat porridge from a stall.”

Turning about, Ellen briskly walked to the stall and paid several copper coins. She returned calmly with a wooden bowl full of porridge.

Due to the fresh herbs, the porridge had a refreshing scent which stimulated Tigre's nose. Ellen purposely stood in front of Ludmira and slowly brought the porridge to her mouth with her wooden spoon.

--- *So, So childish...*

Tigre's impression was for both Ellen and Ludmira.

While he thought about whether he should separate the two, Ludmira narrowed her eyes and frowned. Her face was pale with anger. Without moving, she tightly grasped her fist and glared at Ellen.

“Eleanora-sama.”

Though Lim frowned and admonished Ellen, Ellen did not bother to listen.

He remembered their conversation in the mansion. Though he understood Ellen disliked Ludmira, it seemed a bit over the top.

“... My stomach's a bit empty. May I buy some more?”

When he asked Lim, Ellen nodded in confirmation. Tigre walked to the stand and ordered two portions for Lim and himself.

“I'm pretty hungry. Do you mind giving me some more?”

Tigre asked the man as he passed him a few copper coins.

The porridge included bird meat, nuts, and many sweet herbs, which greatly stimulated the appetite. Due to how it was seasoned, along with his hunger, he thought he would be able to eat a lot.

Tigre took the bowl and walked back to Ellen and the others. Fortunately, a fight had not yet occurred. Tigre presented the wooden bowl full of porridge to Ludmira.

“If you'd like, would you have some? Maybe it's because I'm male, but he gave me a bit too much.”

If he did not ask this way, the girl probably would not eat.

Though he had no obligation to do so, Tigre wanted to avoid a dangerous atmosphere. Though he was amazed by Ludmira's childish obstinacy, he thought it a little pleasing.

"... If that is the case, I will accept."

Ludmira timidly extended her hand and took the wooden bowl. She blew on the porridge to cool it down.

"... It is not bad."

"That's good."

"I will remember this, Earl Vorn."

There was neither mockery nor ridicule. Ludmira looked up at Tigre with a small, but innocent smile.

"Next time, I will treat you to tea."

Immediately after she thanked him, he breathed in relief in his mind. Ellen suddenly gripped Tigre's collar and dragged him away after handing her porridge to Lim.

“Why did you do that?”

“That's my line.”

Ellen glared at Tigre sullenly. He gave her an aggressive gaze in return.

“It's one thing if you're friends, but you two clearly aren't. How could I possibly watch that?”

“You belong to me. Even so---”

Ellen was raising her voice when she noticed a passing mother and child. She could hear the people talk about the two as if they were blindly having a passionate lovers ' quarrel.

Ellen's face flushed red, and she looked downward in silence. Though Tigre also heard the people, he recited the name of the Pantheon of Gods in his mind and desperately calmed himself.

“... Hey, Ellen.”

Because Tigre spoke in a subdued voice, Ellen became calm.

“I know there are people you can't like; it's the same for me. But if you keep up with this, you'll only get tired and force yourself into a corner.”

Ellen looked at Tigre with up-turned eyes.

“... Are you telling me to grow up?”

“Just relax a little bit. It's better to spend your time laughing than being angry. If you keep this up, you'll go bald early.”

Ellen did not respond to his poor joke. Though she looked at Tigre in frustration, the irritation radiating from her body slowly subsided.

“... I got it.”

Before long, Ellen said those words with a sigh. She eventually smiled brightly in the manner Tigre was accustomed to seeing.

“You're right. I think it's best to spend my time smiling . I'd rather not bother with Ludmira, and it's not good to give you and Lim unnecessary anxiety. Still...”

Ellen reached out and lightly pinched Tigre's nose, though it was light enough that he did not feel pain. Tigre blinked in confusion, since he did not understand Ellen's intent. Ellen glared at him with a mixture of embarrassment and emotional dependence; it was a difficult expression.

"... Like I thought, I can't be happy that you gave that woman some porridge. At least let me do this much."

Tigre was surprised as they passed through the entrance of the bathhouse.

It was not simply a bathhouse; there was a tavern and inn inside as well.

The guests amused themselves with cards and chess in the spacious rooms, and there are others who chatted at the bar after leaving the hot water.

There were stalls with skewers of meat, mushrooms, and herbs, and others that sold mineral water in small bottles.

It was overflowing with vigor, heat, and excitement. Tigre looked about in blank surprise; Ellen stood proudly as she spoke.

“It seems a Vanadis many generations ago liked the hot springs here. She exempted them from taxes so long as they maintained the bathhouse, though the taxes weren't that high to begin with.”

“Is it possible she built the villa there so she could easily reach this town?”

Ludmira asked Ellen, unable to hide her amazement.

“Since the Vanadis built it there, I would think so. Well , that would not be reason enough. She likely used it to inspect the area around the Vosyes Mountains as well.”

Lim finished checking in at the hotel. To avoid useless quarrels, she reserved three rooms for Tigre, Ellen and Lim, and Ludmira.

Though the rooms were small and had a small window on the wall and a single bed, the floors were cleaned, and the linens were laundered.

As soon as he settled down, Tigre postponed his meal and his trip to the baths. Tigre first maintained his bow, though, since it was ready to be used at once, he did nothing spectacular. He wiped the dust off with a coarse cloth and rubbed honey into it with his skin.

Afterward, he carefully examined his leather armor and shoes.

Ellen knocked on the door as he finished his work.

“You still haven't gone to the baths yet?”

Ellen's face was strangely flushed as she asked. She was a little large for the robe she wore. Since it was sleeveless, it was easy to see her ample bosom. Her silver-white hair was still wet, and a mysterious smell drifted from her thin arms extending from her clothes.

He was troubled by where to look.

"I'll show you where to go. Though there are three baths, one of them has been reserved for the Vanadis. It's so we can use it at any time."

Tigre looked away while pretending to concentrate on his bow; however, she had completely seen through him.

"You clearly saw me at the Imperial Palace. There's no need to feel shy now."

Ellen chuckled as she played with the hem of her robe.

Tigre let out a small breath and collected himself before leaving the room. He headed toward the bathhouse based on Ellen's directions, so he arrived rather quickly.

There was a dimly lit dressing room as soon as he opened the door. The baths were further in.

--- I wonder if the structure is the same for the other baths.

He took his clothes off and placed them in a rattan basket. Tigre pushed the door open.

He involuntarily let out a groan. The bath was splendidly made.

A thick steam shrouded the bath, which was lined with marble tiles of different colors. Stones paved the area without a single gap between, like a cobblestone street. Along one wall was an image of a pitch-black giant dragon. It seemed to represent a Vanadis.

However, Tigre could hardly see them.

One girl stood in the bath.

It was Ludmira. She was not wearing a stitch of clothing. Her fair skin was faintly dyed red, and the hot water dripped from the tip of her blue hair.

Tigre was unable to look away from her body due to his shock and astonishment.



While Ludmira also stood, as if she were made of stone, she recovered first and picked up her spear on the floor. Shortening the distance in a moment, she had thrust the spear before Tigre's face.

“... I didn't think people brought weapons into the bath.”

Those were the words that finally left Tigre's mouth. Though he tried to turn his face away from Ludmira's naked body, her spear moved quickly, preventing him from doing so.

Though he shut his eyes, the scene he saw a moment before was burnt on the back of his eyelids.

“Um, you should cover yourself. Isn't it embarrassing?”

“Is it embarrassing to be seen by a cat or a dog?”

It was a prompt answer. Her quiet voice was tinged with anger. Tigre could not object; if he opened his eyes at this time, though, he would see that her eyes trembled with anger, and her spear shook out of embarrassment.

--- That's right, Ellen had the Silver Flash nearby when she bathed.

The Vanadis always had the Dragonic Viralt Tool within grasp.

"... Given how you look, it seems you did not come to humiliate me."

"It was an accident. It was my fault for not checking to see if someone was in here, though."

"Your language."

"I apologize."

Shortly after, the air shook and a hard object struck Tigre's head. He held his head in response to the pain. Because Tigre's eyes were closed, he was defenseless; he fell to the floor in agony.

Ludmira gave a snort and briskly walked away.

Tigre finally opened his eyes once he heard the door swiftly close behind him. Tears blotted his eyes and he held his head as he stood up. He looked down at his body which was not covered by a cloth.

"Seen by a cat or a dog, is it..."

It was very difficult for Tigre to consider it in that manner.

「その、身体を隠してくれ。
恥ずかしくないのか？」

「犬や猫に身体を見られて恥ずかしいと思うの？」

Incidentally, it later became clear that this encounter was set up by Ellen.

It was her little bit of mischief, since it required Tigre to head to the bath immediately.

The next morning, Tigre and the others left Rodnick and headed to the main road. They would reach the road to the Imperial Palace before midday.

The sky was dark, and thick gray clouds covered the sky, heralding the arrival of rain.

As Tigre and the others advanced on their horses, the atmosphere remained quiet.

Ludmira remained silent as she coldly stared at Tigre, who could do nothing but endure; meanwhile, Ellen simply smiled wryly as she watched the two. Though

Lim looked at Tigre in sympathy, she could not erase the signs of shock and contempt in her eyes.

Incidentally, the four knew it was a situation planned by Ellen.

The wilderness ended as the meadow spread out before them. They followed a small road which would be sure to meet the main highways.

“You---”

When they had entered the woods, Ellen spoke to Ludmira.

“You said you came to see what kind of man Tigre was . Did you manage to achieve your goal?”

The forest grew thick, and the needles of the cypress trees remained throughout the winter.

The weather was poor as well, making the forest seem even darker. The road was narrow and bumpy, which further fueled any sense of unease.

“--- Yes. I understand him quite well.”

Ludmira answered curtly with an unfriendly tone.

“He is a worthless man who is somewhat good with words. I do not know why you are with such a man... but I suppose a dog will go with a dog, and a cat will go with a cat. In that way, he suits you quite well.”

Ludmira glanced over her shoulder toward Tigre, as if staring at a piece of dirt. Tigre caught her glance, but refrained from forming a rebuttal. Though it was according to Ellen's plan, it was his fault that she had been seen.

“--- I see. I got it.”

Ellen shook her shoulders in laughter. Seeing this, Ludmira frowned.

“I do not recall saying anything worth laughing at.”

“No, you said something funny just now. It seems your eyes aren't good enough if you can't see Tigre's merits.”

“I did not think the day would come when I pitied you .”

Ludmira could no longer find any words to say as she shook her head in fatigue. Her words were partly sarcastic, with the rest being her true feelings of amazement.

On the other hand, while Ellen tried to return to her previous attitude, her smile disappeared and she spoke. Her expression became serious as she pulled on the reins. It was difficult to tell whether her instinct or Arifal's warning was faster.

Ludmira also noticed it, shortly after Ellen. Tigre and Lim, behind the two, had also felt it.

To the left and right were trees, and there were no shadows in the vicinity. Though the road was straight and they could look far ahead, they could not find peddlers, travelers, or even a single hunter.

However, there were signs. They had carefully approached like beasts that had found their prey, hiding in the trees under the cover of darkness.

“--- We're surrounded.”

“Assassins.”

Ellen muttered to herself leisurely while Lim's face tightened.

While Tigre and Lim could not conceal their tension, Ellen and Ludmira calmly prepared their weapons. Perhaps they were accustomed to it as Vanadis.

“It's a bit late for thieves to be out here. I wonder who they are aiming for.”

“It would be either you or me, correct?”

Ludmira spoke as if it were natural. Ellen simply smiled as she shook her head.

“Tigre's a worthwhile target now, as well. If Tigre dies, Duke Thenardier would jump for joy, since I would leave Brune.”

“I'd rather you not say that so easily.”

Tigre expressed his disgust as he nocked an arrow to his bow. Though he did not want to believe it, he thought it possible for Duke Thenardier.

--- What should I do? The enemy can attack while concealing their identity. I may have no choice but to use the horses as a shield.

“Shall we turn back, Eleanora-sama?”

“On this narrow and rough road? They'll definitely come out, however...”

Ellen looked forward and then looked back at Tigre.

“Give me an arrow.”

Unable to read her intent, Tigre passed her an arrow from the quiver in his saddle. Ellen casually tossed it in the air.

The arrow rotated as it flew through the air. Suddenly, it split in two and fell to the ground, making a dry sound .

“... I thought so.”

“What was that?”

Tigre could not understand the spectacle before his eyes. Ellen responded with an unpleasant expression.

“Steel wire. If it's low, it will cut your feet. If it's high, it will cut your neck. There's definitely more than one.”

“I see.”

Ludmira nodded in admiration.

“This group moved ahead of us and waited for us to approach.”

“They likely set it up ahead of time and would take advantage of it while we ran ahead to get rid of them. They must have explored this area quite a bit.”

Ellen gazed at the thin road along which multiple steel wires were spread.

“Eleanora. Use your [Dragonic Veda Skill] and blow them away.”

“If the ground is destroyed, our horses will be unable to move forward, and the surrounding trees will get caught up in it.”

Tigre turned to Lim, hearing a word he was unaccustomed to hearing.

“Lord Tigrevurmud, do you remember when Eleanora-sama killed the Earth Dragon (Suro)? Though I did not see it, Eleanora-sama did not use normal means to defeat the Dragon.”

“Ah, it's true, she had done it when she called out [Cleave the Wind (Ley Admos)]...”

“That is the name of her [Dragonic Skill]”

Tigre thanked Lim and was called by Ellen.

“Tigre. Any ideas? This foolish woman doesn't seem to want to do anything troublesome herself.”

“Do not tell lies. I simply said you should use your power first.”

Tigre felt admiration seeing the two Vanadis glare at each other while ignoring the assassins in the vicinity. He could not understand how they could remain so calm.

--- They’re that used to it?

Tigre looked down the road where the presence felt rough as he thought it all pointless. He looked up at the sky clad in gray clouds and pulled out a small flask from his saddle.

When he opened the lid of the flask, he threw the water inside before him. A small sound of water splashing on the ground accompanied the black stain of where the water fell to.

In the air, countless drops of water floated, drawing a straight line as the water clung to the steel wire. Ellen and Lim looked at him in admiration, and even Ludmira could not hide her surprise.

“If there's light, it becomes easier to see this way... By the way, would there be a trap if we were to cut these?”

“I doubt they could afford the time for that. We left Rodnick today, but they would need to know exactly which path we were heading down.”

When Ellen finished speaking, a nearby leaf swayed; it was not done by the wind. Tigre noticed it, threw away his flask, and promptly grabbed his bow and arrows.

However, he did not nock his arrow in time. His instinct, or perhaps something akin to intuition, told Tigre of a silent danger. He removed his foot from the bridle, forcibly took a defensive position, and jumped off his horse.

Immediately afterward, an arrow was released from the depths of the forest at a tremendous speed, piercing the trunk of a tree just beyond Tigre. If he was a moment late in jumping off or did not crouch to the ground, it would have gone through his chest.

--- There's more to come...

In the branches and leaves Tigre aimed at before, a small figure jumped out. Though his stature was short like a child's, the face belonged to an adult male.

The man held a cylinder in his thin fingers and turned its tip to Tigre.

A needle spouted from the cylinder. Tigre could not avoid it, since his body had not yet been ready to move.

That moment, as if it slid along the ground, a gust rushed by. The needle tip pointed upward and fell to the ground.

When the man took out a new needle, Tigre nocked his arrow and shot at a distance a needle would reach him. The arrow pierced deeply through the man's head and stuck into the tree behind him.

“So so.”

Ellen smiled to Tigre on the ground from atop her horse with her long sword, the Silver Flash, in her hand. She had diverted the needle he was unable to avoid.

“Relax. You don't need to worry about arrows or needles hitting us as long as we're here.”

“You saved me. Save the jokes for later.”

Ludmira looked down on the assassin's corpse with cold indifference and nodded with conviction.

Serasyu

“These men are the Seven Chains.”

“Seven Chains?”

Lim asked in a parrot-like fashion. Ludmira responded as if it were a trivial matter.

“They are a notorious, seven man assassination group. It is my first time encountering them.”

Ludmira moved the tip of the spear in her hand toward the corpse. She pointed to a tattoo in the shape of a chain along the body's left arm.

“This tattoo is their proof of identity.”

“You know quite a bit.”

Both Tigre and Ellen looked at Ludmira in admiration. Rather than boasting, Ludmira responded as if disheartened.

“That is natural. I have knowledge accumulated from generation to generation of the Lurie family. I am different from a Vanadis who is fresh off the farm.”

Though Ellen was clearly offended, she did not retort. She took a step or two back on her horse in order to protect Tigre who had finally risen.

Lim moved her horse accordingly to protect Ellen.

The air wiggled again as movement occurred in the branches and leaves. Tigre and the others established their arms and took caution.

Suddenly, a black shadow fell from the branches of the trees stretched over Lim. It was the upper body of a man hanging upside down, hanging off a branch by his feet. He had lurked there and awaited his chance.

The assassin approached Lim at a furious speed and tried to stab her with a dagger; it was a poisonous fang that would easily take her life with only a graze.

Lim remained calm and cut through the man's neck with her sword. Fresh blood spouted from his wound and the assassin fell to the ground. Lim looked down to confirm his death.

In that moment, her reaction was delayed.

A snake fell from above and pounced on Lim. It was a two-step attack.

Lim failed to avoid the snake.

“Lim!”

Ellen cried out; her face was pale. She moved out of instinct and cut through the snake with the Silver Flash. A blade of wind was released from her argent sword and the snake's head was cleanly bisected.

“How are you!?”

Tigre and Ellen ran up to Lim. Though she opened her mouth to speak, no words came out.

Tigre caught her in his arms as she fell off her horse.

“What's wrong!?”

There was no answer. Lim's face was red with a fever, and sweat blotted her forehead.

--- Is this poison?

Tigre looked at the corpse of the snake and confirmed its identity through the scales. He turned back and looked at Lim, but he could find no injury on her face or neck.

Two small holes were lined up neatly on her right breast.

"Tigre! What happened!? What's wrong with Lim!?"

Ellen's expression and her tone showed she was nearly on the verge of tears, but Tigre did not look at her; he could not afford to.

He quietly lay Lim on the ground and tore her clothes off. Her rich, twin hills bounced from the momentum. He put his mouth to the wound on her right chest and began sucking strongly. He spat out the blood which had accumulated on the surface of her wound.

"...!"

A heated groan came from Lim's mouth as she was unable to bear the sensation.

--- It's good I knew what kind of snake that was.

Many years ago, he had been taught how to treat such injuries from Batran while he hunted in the mountains.

--- If we quickly return to Rodnick, we can give her better care.

While he thought this, two more sounds hit Tigre's ear.


声に含まれた熱に吐息が上ぼせた。
リムの口からこぼれ、それがさらなる口の奥に流れ込む。
「……っ」
強く吸う。

A chill ran down his backbone. Four shadows danced through the air above him. The hidden assassins had moved in unison.

It was impossible for Lim or him to move, and though Ellen reacted, she was slower than usual.

--- In a place like this...!

At that time, small legs landed near Tigre.

It was Ludmira. The assassins did not come to attack her, and the Vanadis with blue hair was not even the slightest bit upset.

"--- Lavias."

It was the name of her spear.

When she spun the spear in her hand, it grew to Ludmira's height.

Shero Zam Kafa
"Freeze the Sky."

Her clear, cold voice, reminiscent of ice without a hint of impurity, sounded faintly throughout the forest.

Ludmira pierced the ground with the tip of her spear. A white light tinged with an icy air emitted from the tip as many crystals drew to Ludmira.

The cold air erupted.

Tigre, who had witnessed the spectacle, could only express it that way.

Large crystals which froze the very atmosphere surrounded Ludmira, as if drawn to protect her.

An uncountable number of ice spears were projected. It was a violent looking power; it looked like a large monster with many fangs lined up along its jaw.

The thorns of ice avoided Tigre and mowed down the surrounding trees or blew upward into the sky.

The assassins were unable to escape. Their faces and bodies were drilled through by sharp icicles, and their pale bodies were dyed red.

One man's head was crushed, killing him immediately, and there was another who reeled in pain as poison he possessed rained over him; however, that was over in an instant as his hand froze and shattered.

After confirming the assassins were no longer breathing, Ludmira removed her spear from the ground thick with ice. She rotated her spear once and struck the ground lightly.

The ice blew away while emitting a sound as if glass were crushed. It melted into the air and sprinkled grains of white ice to the ground.

"--- I am disappointed."

The shaft of the spear had shortened. Ludmira vomited words as if provoking Ellen, her eyes filled with anger and contempt.

"To lose yourself over a single vassal. Eleanora, you are not qualified to be a Vanadis. You should throw aside Arifal before you bring misfortune to your people."

After spitting out those words, Ludmira mounted her horse without looking at Ellen. Though Tigre was astonished and had trouble speaking, he finally called out to Ludmira.

Ludmira turned her head slightly to Tigre.

"Thanks. For helping."

The Vanadis with the spear of ice did not respond. Her glance moved from Tigre past Ellen. The cold atmosphere was blown away and scattered down the road.

Tigre saw her off and looked back at Lim.

Her rich chest shook from her rough breathing. At last, Tigre considered what he had just done. Her skin was faintly covered in sweat, and her right breast was faintly red where Tigre strongly sucked the poison from.

He had torn away all her clothes. After covering her up, he turned back to Ellen to apologize.

The Vanadis with silver-white hair lowered the sword in her hand and silently stared at Tigre.

"Her condition?"

"Because Lim is sturdy, she should be fine. From what I can remember, only the elderly and sick died from the poison from this snake. If we return to Rodnick, we can treat her and she should survive. The components for the medicine can be found anywhere."

Tigre spoke to encourage Ellen. Though it was not a lie that the only ones to die were the elderly and the ill, there was no telling whether Lim would live or not. He did not know if the assassins modified the snake, either.

Reassured by Tigre, Ellen's tense face relaxed.

“I got it. Tigre, you head to Rodnick and call a doctor. I'll carry Lim on my horse and catch up.”

By the time Lim woke up, two days had passed.

The sun shined through the window, and the birds were chirping. For a while, she looked at the ceiling blankly. She suddenly felt a weight around her belly and cast her eyes downward.

It was the dull red hair she was accustomed to seeing. He seemed to be sleeping, since his faint breathing could be heard.

Lim tried to push him away on reflex, but stopped herself to confirm the situation. She was in a spacious room with a table and chair and the bed she slept on.

“Rodnick?”

It was too recent to forget. Lim searched her memory. It was cut off after she killed the assassin when she saw the snake.

At that time, the door opened and a girl with argent hair down to her waist smiled brightly at the sight of Lim .

“You're awake, Lim.”

“Eleanora-sama.”

Though Lim began to sit up, Ellen shook her head and stopped her.

“Lim, we are not in the Imperial Palace. It's just the two of us; you can call me Ellen like you did in old times. ”

“That is something I cannot do.”

Though she smiled, rejection was clearly visible in her eyes. Lim continued to speak.

“Though I have said this before, I am the person most intimate with you, Eleanora-sama. I cannot simply use your nickname on such occasions.”

“Thanks to that, he's the only one other than the Vanadis who calls me Ellen.”

Ellen smiled bitterly as she turned to Tigre.

“Even if you told him to, to call Eleanora-sama by her nickname as a prisoner of war is truly surprising.”

The two smiled as they looked at each other.

“... How is your body?”

“I am a little tired, but there should be no problem.”

“I see. You should give your thanks to the sleepy head over there. He did some emergency treatment when you fell.”

Ellen explained the circumstances as she looked down at Tigre with folded arms.

After defeating the assassins, Tigre and Ellen quickly returned to Rodnick.

The two carried Lim to the bed and took turns applying the medicine according to the doctor and nurse's directions.

“I thought you would be fine at first, but the doctor said there was a chance you would turn for the worse. I was really worried.”

So as not to awaken Tigre, Ellen quietly sat down before Lim and brought her hand forward kindly. Lim noticed the dark circles under Ellen's eye.

“I'm really glad you're alive.”

“I apologize. Even though I am to be your guard, I fell so easily.”

“What are you talking about? You did what you needed to do.”

Ellen laughed and lightly touched Lim's forehead with her finger. Lim also smiled.

--- *Thank goodness.*

Lim placed her right hand on her chest and quietly rejoiced that she survived. She could still serve Ellen, she could still help her. She was happy.

“What of the assassins?”

“One escaped. Since the [Seven Serasyu Chains] act in a group of seven, they weren't completely annihilated, so we need to remain vigilant.”

Lim suddenly frowned and stroke the wound. There were herbs ground into it, and it was covered in a clean cloth, but there was something she worried about before that.

“Eleanora-sama. You said Lord Tigrevurmud gave me emergency treatment?”

“Yes. I said that.”

Lim's voice trembled.

“About that... what method did he use?”

“He sucked the poison from the wound.”

Lim noticed the joyful nature in Ellen's voice. Her face quickly became red and hot. Though she had pushed reason aside and instinctively thought to beat Tigre's head, she succeeded in stopping just before doing so.

“I'll say this in his defense. He was desperate to help you at the time; he had no ulterior motives. If anything, I should be the one you hit.”

The hand Lim had stopped in midair was pulled to Ellen's chest.

“When you fell, I could only stand motionless. I could not think or do anything like a child.”

“But you were the one who carried me here, Eleanora-sama.”

Ellen looked wistfully at Lim, as if she had something more to say, but all that left the mouth of the Vanadis with silver-white hair were her thanks.

She quietly grasped Lim's hand and let her heart soak in the warmth of her life. Ellen reluctantly parted and stood up.

"We'll come back again. We need to leave and head to the Palace today."

Ellen wore her vigorous and fearless face, the face of a Vanadis, once again as she spoke. Lim nodded and looked down at Tigre's head.

"If possible, I would like to let Tigre rest some more, since he's probably tired."

Ellen smiled wryly; Lim nodded in agreement.

But they did not have the time to spare.

After thinking for a while, Lim decided to wake him as gently as possible. She placed her fingers in Tigre's red hair and tried to shake him awake.

"Lord Tigrevurmud. Please wake up."

However, Tigre groaned quietly and violently brushed Lim's hand aside.

His hand moved further and grabbed Lim's chest. Though it was unconscious, he was massaging her quite vigorously.

Tigre was then awakened by a violent slap.

Cold Snow and Something Warm

Olmutz was located in the southwest portion of Zhcted.

To the north was LeitMeritz, which Ellen governed. To the west were the Vosyes Mountains which acted as a border to Brune Kingdom. Muozinel Kingdom was in view beyond the wilderness, lakes, and mountains to the south.

The ruler of this Dukedom where men and cultures of three countries existed was Ludmira Lurie.

She was a Vanadis called the [Snow Princess Michielia of the Frozen Wave].

At the moment, in her office in her Imperial Palace, Ludmira quietly took tea.

She needed to clear up the work that had built up while she visited that woman from LeitMeritz in the mountains.

Tea was Ludmira's favorite dish, or perhaps it would be best to call it her hobby. She enjoyed brewing it herself and drinking it with others. The jam she mixed into it was also made by herself.

Ludmira stopped her hands suddenly as she looked at the white porcelain tea cup.

"... I believe I said I would treat him to tea."

Because her interest had disappeared, she almost forgot his name. After pouring more tea, Ludmira finally recalled it.

"It was Vorn, that aristocrat from Brune. Tigrevurmud Vorn."

It was a long name for a person from Brune. Ludmira had no other impressions.

"Though she told His Majesty she was employed... Would she truly help such a man to defend LeitMeritz from war?"

If it was an issue of love as the rumors had said, it would simply be a bore. Rather, her taste in men would be poor.

--- You are disqualified as a Vanadis if you place your emotions before your country, Eleanora.

Ludmira Lurie's mother was a Vanadis, as was her grandmother and great grandmother.

A person did not choose to be a Vanadis, so there can be no disagreement with the selection of the Vanadis. Though it was surprising the title of Vanadis passed down her generations, it was a pleasant thing. With a Vanadis as a teacher, she learned of what was needed for her position.

However, it was not that simple.

Daughters were not always born, and there was no guarantee they would have the same brilliance. Even if she were talented, there was no guarantee she would grow as expected. Even after surpassing such difficulties, another person suited to being a Vanadis may appear.

Though many Vanadis tried to raise their daughters to become Vanadis, there was rarely any success. There were very few who realized their desires.

There were few enough family lines in which the Vanadis had continued through the generations that it could be counted on one hand.

The Lurie family is one such rare example.

Ludmira had been given an education on how to be a Vanadis from an early age. She was taught how to use a spear and horse, and she was given the knowledge necessary to govern the land of Olmutz.

Ludmira was 14 when her mother suddenly died of a cold which progressed to pneumonia. She departed the world in an unsatisfying manner after sleeping for several days.

The [Spear of Evil Death (Hajya no Zenkaku)] chose Ludmira as the new Vanadis.

Superficially, Ludmira did not mourn over her mother's death. She did not have the time to spare for it.

Though no one hoped to become the Vanadis governing Olmutz more than Ludmira, there were still people watching her.

She had a strong desire to protect her vassals and carry out her duties as a Vanadis, following her mother and grandmother's footsteps.

Some time later, Ludmira heard of a new Vanadis chosen to take over LeitMeritz.

Furthermore, she was 14, the same age as Ludmira.

She was interested.

The Vanadis of Olmutz and the Vanadis of LeitMeritz had had a bad relationship over many generations.

Though it was natural they be wary of each other, having territories near each other, they had clashed more than just once or twice. Ludmira's mother was also involved in frequent arguments.

--- This person I may fight, I wish to see her with my own eyes.

While Ludmira was cautious, she held some hope as well.

--- If we can become friends, then Olmutz and LeitMeritz will see a light of peace that has not been present since ancient times.

The idea came from her solitude as a ruler. The Vanadis from LeitMeritz was different from her; she was a traveler.

--- Depending on the situation, I can teach her many things.

Ludmira headed to LeitMeritz with such high hopes where she met Ellen. Naturally, they did not get along; rather, they fought.

“You are a person fresh out of the country, an arrogant barbarian who has not a single fragment of modesty or humility.”

That was Ludmira's evaluation of Ellen. Coincidentally , Ellen had a similar appraisal of Ludmira.

“She's a condescending girl with a large attitude who has nothing to boast of but her lineage.”

Though Vanadis, they were 14 year old girls.

Furthermore, Ludmira had been restless, and Ellen was confused, having just become a Vanadis. Perhaps this result was inevitable.

Though they wanted to ignore each other, such a relationship was impossible due to their territories being near one another. Neither wanted to lose to the other, as well.

One year became two, and Ellen had shown her merit on the battlefield and in how she governed LeitMeritz, so Ludmira had no choice but to acknowledge her to some extent. That is why she held an interest in Tigre.

--- I wonder what value that man has.

A knock on the door restored Ludmira to her surroundings. She had been lost in her thoughts for quite a while, as the tea in her white porcelain cup had gone completely cold.

"Enter."

She gently spoke before an elderly chamberlain entered, displaying a reverent attitude. He had worked

in the Imperial Palace since her mother's time and was one of Ludmira's trusted subordinates.

"A messenger representing Duke Thenardier has come ."

Ludmira frowned. Honestly, she did not want to meet him.

Her association with Duke Thenardier was from the time of her great grandmother. The Duke at that time was known as a man of character. The household in the present day was known for the tyranny it spread amongst the people under its charge.

However, he was always sincere with his business outside the country, and Ludmira never felt dissatisfaction in her correspondence.

--- I am the Lord of Olmutz. I must not give priority to my personal emotions.

"... I will meet him."

Ludmira responded calmly and stood from her chair.

Ellen intended to move her soldiers to Brune immediately upon returning to the Imperial Palace, but she received an unexpected report.

“Olmutz soldiers are gathered near the border?”

The soldier reported there were signs of movement in the direction of Olmutz.

“Yes. Approximately two thousand troops are training and preparing for winter.”

“Is Ludmira there?”

“Many of our scouts have confirmed her presence.”

--- Is this a check?

Ellen's face clouded over. Ludmira said she was siding with Duke Thenardier, and she took action immediately.

In addition, a letter from Viscount Augre was sent from Alsace.

[A suspicious traveler was caught in the Vosyes Mountains. He had a strange letter we wanted you to see .]

After the bandits had been swept away, Viscount Augre and his men made numerous trips to the Vosyes Mountains. He was on the lookout for any bandits that may have remained when he caught a traveler.

The letter was addressed from Duke Thenardier to Ludmira.

Removing the formalities and compliments in the letter, it could be easily simplified.

[When Eleanora takes command of her troops and heads to Brune, I want you to immediately attack LeitMeritz as originally planned.]

Tigre headed to the office and showed the letter to Ellen and Lim who were fighting a pile of papers in front of them.

Ellen quickly looked over the letter and snorted.

"Though the son who was killed in Molsheim was an idiot, it seems his father is quite a villain. He's good."

Tigre looked at Lim who arranged documents next to Ellen. She responded without looking away from the papers.

"Lord Tigrevurmud. Why do you think the Duke sent his messengers up the Vosyes Mountains? Since Viscount Augre is at odds with the Duke, is it not too dangerous to use that path, even if it is the shortest route to Olmutz?"

Tigre felt it was as she said. He was surprised.

"Then... the Duke is trying to provoke us by letting this letter fall into our hands?"

"That is most likely. To fight a Vanadis, it is natural to use another Vanadis."

Ellen spoke and patted the Arifal's sheath as it leaned against the wall.

"But how did he know Viscount Augre was our ally? If not for the bandits..."

Tigre's words ended there.

--- I see, so he employed them to attack the fields...

He realized why the bandits had remained in the Vosyes Mountains and how they procured the armor from Olmutz.

--- The Duke has connections with Olmutz, so that much should be simple for him. He probably dislikes Viscount Augre for advocating neutrality, so he has no qualms about attacking.

When Tigre stated his reasoning, Lim expressed her approval with light clapping.

"The Duke likely changed his plans. When we defeated the bandits, Territoire allied with us, but our relation with Ludmira-sama became poor. He likely wanted to use this to crush Eleanora-sama."

"The message Ludmira likely received was asking her to move her soldiers in such a way that they would restrain my movements. Given the length of their relationship, he probably understands exactly how much she will do."

In order to annoy Ellen, Ludmira moved her soldiers to the border in order to watch for Ellen's departure from LeitMeritz.

Even if she successfully left her territory, she needed to leave her soldiers behind in the case of an emergency.

In order for Thenardier to fight Ganelon without worrying about the third force forming beneath Tigre, he had to crush Tigre before Ellen regained her freedom of action.

“No, if it's her, she might attack once I move away...”

“However, Ludmira-sama will gain nothing if she fights with you, Eleanora-sama.”

She protects her association with Thenardier. The problem is where Ludmira's values lie.

Ellen groaned with her arms crossed. She looked out the window and gazed at the scenery as she planned her actions.

Before long, she returned the longsword to the wall and looked back at Tigre with a small sigh.

"Tigre. You decide."

Ellen stared at Tigre with her bright red eyes. Tigre returned a look of bewilderment.

"Even if it means following her provocations, I believe Ludmira should be defeated here. It would be fine if she simply moved to the border to provoke you into action, but you must rid yourself of any anxiety you might have in the future. However... If you wish to head to Brune immediately, I will follow after you."

Tigre did not respond immediately.

"... You would leave such an important decision to me ?"

This decision would significantly impact the future.

She had killed the assassins, who attacked all at once, without much difficulty. It would not be an easy battle. If they fought Ludmira, they would lose time and soldiers.

However, as Ellen said, it was dangerous to return to Brune while ignoring her.

If Ludmira attacked LeitMeritz, even if Ellen returned immediately, the land would be severely damaged. Thenardier would also move in at that time and get rid of Tigre.

Tigre did not think he had the capabilities to judge the situation.

However, Ellen nodded as she stared straight at Tigre.

“It is precisely because this is important that I want you to decide.”

Ellen spoke bluntly and turned away.

Tigre stirred his dull red hair and quietly shut his eyes. He explored his memories, little by little, of the day he met Ludmira. He looked at every expression and recalled every word.

--- That’s right. There’s no need to hesitate.

Ludmira's words and attitude were clear.

If she judged it necessary, she would fight.

It was not just LeitMeritz that Ludmira was threatening, but Territoire as well, which lay across the Vosyes Mountains.

He could not lose the ally he had just gained.

Tigre opened his eyes with a will to fight and spoke in a dignified manner.

“We will send two messengers to her. We will show her the letter, and if its content is a lie and she truly has no hostility, we will request she have her soldiers stand down as proof.”

“And if you are rejected, or if there is a delay in the response?”

“We will apply a time limit. If she complains, we will remove her by force.”

Ellen laughed as she and Lim looked at each other, hearing Tigre's clear response.

“Then let's do that.”

The next day, three thousand soldiers, led by Tigre, Ellen, and Lim, moved to the south of LeitMeritz and

stopped near the border. They sent a messenger to Ludmira, appealing for her retreat.

Ludmira rejected them twice, so the LeitMeritz Army resumed their march.

The fight between Vanadis began.

Ludmira Lurie received a report that the troops of LeitMeritz were approaching.

Ludmira basically used the same housing as the soldiers, and she took the same meals as them. The only thing that could be called an exception was tea. She almost always carried it, and was drinking her tea when she received the report.

“I see. So Eleanora has come.”

The scouts have confirmed her appearance. Furthermore, next to the Vanadis-sama of the Silver Flash, there is a young man with red hair of the same age .

Regardless of who the Lord was, it was customary in Zhcted to pay honor to the Vanadis.

"Red hair... Ah, Tigrevurmud Vorn."

Ludmira muttered without much interest. Tigre was simply a bonus alongside Ellen; he was a trivial existence .

When the soldier finished the report, Ludmira thanked him for his hard work.

"You must be tired. Have a cup of tea."

She took a small heated stone placed beside her chair and set an iron kettle filled with hot water atop it. The soldier gave his words of gratitude as Ludmira sat back down and placed two crystal jars before them. One held tea leaves while the other held jam.

The hot water was poured into the white porcelain cups, and the jam melted.

"It is hot. Take care and drink slowly."

The soldier thanked her again and took the cup graciously. Ludmira watched him with a smile. It was soothing for her to see someone savor the tea she brewed herself.

When the soldier left, her smile disappeared. Ludmira called for her Commanders.

"I will have Eleanora brought before me. I will defeat her myself."

Ludmira extended her hand and grasped the spear at her side.

The handle of the spear was short, and the tip was surrounded by crystals of ice.

It was the Dragonic Viralt Tool which commands the cold, the Frozen Wave Lavias.

"We will move as planned. We will battle her on Burkina Plains and then shut ourselves in the Tatra Mountains."

"... Lurie-sama."

There were two Commanders standing before her. One was in his mid 30s and had a much richer experience in combat than Ludmira, who was still 16. He excelled in swordsmanship and horsemanship. He gazed sadly at the girl he served.

"What is it?"

Though Ludmira understood what he wished to say, she still asked.

"Do you truly intend to fight the [Wind Princess Silvfrau of the Silver Flash]?"

"I will do so because it is necessary to show my loyalty to the Duke of another country."

Ludmira caught their gaze and responded with a grim voice.

"The Lurie family has had connections with Duke Thenardier's household for more than eighty years. I cannot simply cut it off on my own."

--- I have pride and dignity. I am different from Eleanora...!

That thought supported Ludmira as well as bound her.

In accordance to the commands given by the Vanadis with blue hair, the Olmutz Army took action.

It took approximately half a day after they left LeitMeritz, passing through the lands under direct

control of the kingdom, for them to enter Olmutz. They were met with undulated grasslands.

This grassland, the Burkina Plains, overlooked the Tatra Mountains to the east. It was wrapped in the cold wind which flew down from the mountains in the autumn evenings. During the winter, there was an occasional light snowfall.

Ellen led three thousand troops from LeitMeritz. By the time they reached Burkina Plains, everyone wore a thick mantle. The sky was covered in gray clouds, hiding the morning sun. The dismal weather further cooled the air; the soldiers' breath was white.

“The enemy is before us! They number two thousand!”

They finished preparing, and the soldiers were in formation. Ellen smiled fearlessly.

Before long, a black mass appeared in the distance, advancing along the ground. They held spears of wood and iron to the sky. The Black Dragon (Zirnitra) Flag could be seen at intervals alongside a fluttering white flag with a blue spear, the banner of the Vanadis.

With a distance of five hundred alsin (approximately five hundred meters) separating the armies, something suddenly fell from the sky.

"... Snow?"

It was unknown who muttered those words. The snow disappeared before it hit the ground, and was followed by more snow drifting down quietly from the sky. The horn of both armies sounded.

All interest in the snow disappeared as both armies charged.

Several thousand bowstrings trembled, and innumerable arrows poured down over both armies.

Once the battle settled down, Ellen led her army forward.

The cavalry raised their spears and gave a cry before rushing forward. They kicked up the grass and shook the earth. The infantry hardened their bodies on reflex.

The two armies which mutually held the Black Dragon Flag clashed; their spears crossed and their shields collided.

Some soldiers collapsed from the horses' unstoppable charge, while others knocked the cavalry to the ground. Those who had fallen were trampled on or cut down as the soldiers swarmed across the land.

The grass was wet, and the cold disappeared as blood dyed the earth. The heat rapidly escaped from the corpses as they fell, while others were quickly crushed as they tried to stand again.

Though the cavalry under Ellen's control was strong, the soldiers following Ludmira stubbornly resisted.

“First Army, retreat. Move forward, Second Team.”

The first set of cavalry retreated and were closely replaced by the cavalry charging in from behind. Though it was just as energetic as the previous attack, it did not break through Ludmira's heavy infantry.

--- Now then, what should I do...

While Ellen assumed leadership of the LeitMeritz Army, she watched the battle carefully from the rear. She did not think it possible to break the enemy's defense from the front, so she gave Lim the order to attack from the side.

After a while, a report came.

“Limlisha-sama's troops were pushed back.”

“... And Lim?”

“She is alive and well.”

Ellen let out a breath of relief and hit the longsword at her waist. The wind strengthened, as if Arifal was complaining.

“I'll be gone for a moment.”

Tigre, who was next to Ellen, was also commanding the troops. He advanced his horse with his bow in hand.

“Don't do the impossible.”

“I won't die here.”

The cavalry rushed forward again. This time, Tigre did not take command but participated as a soldier. Once he judged he was at an appropriate distance, he fired an arrow.

The arrow pierced the leg of an Olmutz soldier who held his spear up, ready to fight the LeitMeritz Army. The soldier fell to his knee and groaned.

“Well done.”

The Commander of the cavalry gave short words of praise as he stood next to Tigre.

“They have good armor.”

Tigre answered with an unpleasant expression. The armor worn by the Olmutz soldiers had very few gaps, and they had a long shield in their left arm. This forced Tigre to aim at their arms and legs.

“Even so, no average soldier can match your reach with an arrow.”

It was clear from the reaction of the Olmutz soldiers. They had closed the distance quickly.

The cavalry collided and pushed one another down. Tigre also shot arrow after arrow, knocking Olmutz soldiers down.

--- Where's the commander? I need to aim at him.

Tigre observed the enemy force and searched for the person in charge. Amongst the swarming soldiers, the glittering swords and spears, and the flying arrows, he could act without hesitation; perhaps it was something uncommon that Tigre possessed.

He found him.

Tigre discovered the person he assumed took lead of the soldiers and fired his bow. However, when the enemy looked as if it were collapsing, other soldiers reinforced their position and the line was repaired.

Though Tigre defeated three people who acted as Commander, the cavalry moved to retreat and abandoned their offense, so he was unable to attack any further.

The LeitMeritz gave up its offensive and retreated. The Olmutz Army also fell back.

By the end of the day, nothing had been settled. Each side had more than one hundred killed in action and fortified their positions five belsta (approximately five kilometers) away.

The snow covered the LeitMeritz Army along with the darkness of the night. Tigre headed to Ellen's tent when the sun was sinking.

Alongside Lim, Ellen had taken to a frugal meal of wine and cheese when she noticed Tigre. She smiled, both appreciation and a desire to tease him mixed within.

“It seems you fought well, according to the reports. How are Ludmira's soldiers?”

“Solid.”

It was the first impression he had. Ellen laughed and nodded earnestly.

“That's right. She is ridiculously good at defense. She might be the best amongst all Vanadis in defensive battles.”

He sat before the two. Lim prepared wine and cheese for him. He gave his thanks and looked at Ellen while nibbling at the cheese.

“Even if you break through, they recover quickly before their wound expands, and even if you attack from the side and from behind, they will push back. They don't respond to provocation. In essence, she does not take any chances yet still remains aggressive.”

“However, I did not see Ludmira-sama at the head of the attack.”

“I'd rather not see her if possible.”

Tigre recalled her appearance as she killed the assassins in an instant. He looked downward seriously and thought about the battlefield.

“What, it's not like I'll lose. It's a field battle. We'll beat and crush her tomorrow.”

Ellen spoke aggressively, either to encourage Tigre or to inspire herself. Lim looked at Ellen expressionlessly.

“I believe we said it was pointless to advance against her.”

“She probably has no other hands. Ludmira's defenses are harder than before. Tigre took the trouble to kill some of her Commanders, so I doubt she can make the best use of her troops now. Ludmira has no choice but to be killed .”

“Eleanora-sama. Have you looked at Ludmira-sama's current war record?”

Ellen thought for a moment with her arms crossed before sitting upright and responding proudly.

“Two victories, one defeat.”

“That is not the same number we heard when we last spoke to Ludmira-sama.”

“What do you mean?”

Tigre frowned and looked at Lim. Lim took a drink while answering indifferently.

"It is of my opinion that they were at a tie; however, they both insist it was their victory."

Tigre sighed and looked at Ellen in amazement.

"Your relationship really is a bad one."

"It's a tradition for LeitMeritz and Olmutz to not get along."

"Tradition?"

"The previous Vanadis and the Vanadis from the generation before have always been hostile toward the Lurie family... That is, Ludmira's mother and grandmother."

Though Ellen replied indignantly, Tigre tilted his head due to something having caught his attention.

"Ludmira's mother and grandmother were Vanadis?"

"Her family line is quite old. She's arrogant because of that."

"... Are Vanadis hereditary in nature?"

Tigre looked at Ellen with a bewildered face. After that , she muttered quietly, as though convincing herself.

"Well, it should be fine to tell you. Don't tell others, though. The Vanadis are chosen by the Dragonic Viralt Tool."

Tigre was unable to react immediately, having been told such an important thing so easily. Ellen picked up Arifal and placed it over her shoulder. She looked at the sheath of the longsword lovingly, though with sarcasm mixed into her gaze.

"A little over two years ago, this fellow chose me to be his Vanadis."

"... I don't quite understand."

Tigre's voice had become hoarse.

--- The weapon chooses its wielder. Though I have seen these in myths and fairy tales, I did not think they actually existed. Weapons are weapons, after all.

However, while Tigre insisted this loudly in his mind, Tigre's memories objected. The longsword in Ellen's hand occasionally playfully hit him with wind.

Also, there was the black bow to his side.

Once before, his bow and Arifal showed a strange resonance. It had spoken to him, and it had done something beyond human knowledge.

--- Maybe that's why Ellen told me.

He felt as though he had stepped into an unknown world in a different dimension. Tigre felt a moment of dismay and wondered if he should even hear this story.

However, Tigre shook it away immediately.

It was something he should know.

One day, he may be confronted with the mystery of his black bow.

He wanted to do more, to be able to help Ellen more in the future.

Ellen laughed happily upon seeing Tigre's expression.

"Good eyes. You're listening seriously."

"Um, how does the Dragonic Viralt Tool chooses the Vanadis ?"

"It suddenly appears before the selected person. If the person takes it in her hand, words flow into her head. It's a bit difficult to explain, but it told me I had become a Vanadis and to head to the Imperial Palace. So I was a Vanadis the day I appeared before the Palace."

--- *Words...*

Tigre glanced at the black bow beside him. After collecting himself, he returned his eyes to Ellen.

"What became of the previous Vanadis?"

"She retired. These guys---"

Ellen held Arifal up.

"They choose a Vanadis when the previous Vanadis is unworthy of their position. That time is judged by these things. It could happen when they're ill or when they have a severe injury that makes life difficult. It also happens if they become incompatible or die. When I arrived at LeitMeritz, my predecessor's funeral had just

ended. The Grand Chamberlain at the Imperial Palace simply bowed before me."

"... Did the people of the Imperial Palace accept it?"

Though Tigre had succeeded his father two years ago when he became an Earl, he understood the situation was completely different. He had lived in Alsace his entire childhood and knew the surroundings and people. He had the support of everyone there.

"Though there were probably some who didn't like it, this guy chose me, so they couldn't help but accept it."

Ellen sarcastically laughed as she shrugged her shoulders. A swirl of wind surrounded Arifal, as if it were proud of itself.

"Also the people of LeitMeritz, no, the people of Zhcted, were all accustomed to it. This tradition has been in practice since Zhcted was first established. Rather than the [Dragonic Viralt Tool] choosing the Vanadis, the Vanadis are chosen by some mystic force. That's how most people interpret it."

While tracing her finger along Arifal's blade, Ellen looked with a disappointed expression.

“However, that's not very convincing with Lavias. It chose the same bloodline; it even chose that Ludmira. I can only think its eyes are rotten.”

Though Tigre was about to say it had no eyes to be rotten, he knew there was some kind of intent in Arifal. It might have eyes unknown to man which lay elsewhere.

“Tigre, what do you think? Do you think that woman who boasts of her lineage is suitable to being a Vanadis? I don't understand why Lavias would choose someone who looks down on others.”

“Ah, yeah...”

He recalled Ludmira. Tigre nodded to indicate his agreement.

“Lord Tigrevurmud. I should say this now, but please ignore Eleanora-sama's evaluation of Ludmira-sama.”

Lim sighed.

“Even their first meeting was terrible...”

Two years ago, when LeitMeritz was celebrating Ellen's arrival as the new Vanadis, Ludmira came to visit.

Ellen went out to see what she wanted just shortly after she began learning proper court etiquette. The civil servants were at a loss for words as she somehow managed a proper greeting.

“Oh my, LeitMeritz is quite tolerant.”

Ludmira reacted by speaking with an arrogant tone and a haughty sneer.

“I had some expectations of a Vanadis my age, though I should apologize for doing so without permission. I suppose it cannot be helped. You are welcome to come play in Olmutz if you wish, though you may want to learn your manners first. I believe even you would not want to be laughed at.”

Ludmira brought her hand to her mouth and elegantly laughed; however, her blue eyes clearly looked down on Ellen from a superior position.

She was looking at me like I was some kind of ape, Ellen complained to Lim at a later date.

"Ah, but perhaps I can teach you. If you bow your head down to me, I can teach you anything, including manners, of course."

"Oh? That's right. Can you teach me how to become taller? Or is that possible? I suppose if you knew of any methods, you would have tried them out long ago."

Ludmira was one head shorter than Ellen, and it seemed to have touched a nerve, as the blue-haired Vanadis flushed red and shouted childishly.

"I, I was simply being kind!"

"Hm. So those of Olmutz impose their kindness on others. It doesn't seem so great."

Ludmira flinched and stammered while Ellen mercilessly continued her attack.

"Who was the one to teach you propriety? He certainly must be a splendid person. Maybe I could use him to clean the yard."

"Wha--- I will not permit you to insult my mother!"

Ellen's bright red eyes and Ludmira's deep blue eyes exploded with hostility.

"I see, so it was your mother. Good. You should come with her and I can teach you both how to properly prostrate yourself."

"You... How dare you say that, even though you are a Vanadis fresh from the countryside!"

The two girls rolled up their skirts and sleeves and pounced on each other like wild beasts.

"In the end, they were shouting and fighting. It took ten people including me to pull them apart."

"Ten people..."

Tigre stared at Lim in sympathy as she finished talking . Ellen had turned away midway and remained silent.

"As a third party, who did you think was at fault?"

"It was a childish fight, so it is difficult to decide."

Tigre gave his answer as he thought through the story again.

"Ludmira-sama's attitude certainly was maddening to watch to others, but she was not being malicious; she had good intentions. Though I am unsure of how things are now..."

"--- Are you finished with the unpleasant talk?"

Lim smiled bitterly having been interrupted. Ellen turned around without concealing her poor mood.

"Let us return to the topic on hand. Anyway, Ludmira and I will fight one on one tomorrow. I will destroy her impregnable defenses and tear her away from the army. That way, it won't be a repeat of today."

Though Lim desperately thought of words of rebuttal, she knew they could not spend a significant time on this.

Tigre began to speak.

“If we destroy the enemy, can you pull back immediately? Even if it is in the midst of battle?”

Though Tigre understood Ellen's strength, Ludmira also had the power of a Vanadis. Tigre understood Lim's anxieties.

If they could not propose an alternate plan, they had no other choice but to overwhelm the enemy as quickly as possible to shorten the duration of Ellen and Ludmira's fight.

Though Ellen looked bitter, she looked at Tigre's eyes and Lim's expression and nodded.

The next day, Burkina Plains was covered in the thick, early morning fog which did not allow the sunlight to penetrate through. It was likely due to the cold meadow remaining from the day before.

“This is bad...”

Following Ellen's instructions, the LeitMeritz Army retreated three belsta (approximately three kilometers) back.

The fog derailed everyone's senses. In a state in which the white mist blocked sight just a few steps ahead, many were subject to the illusion of shadows.

Though it was not impossible to advance while taking advantage of the fog, the land was Ludmira's garden, so to speak. She was well informed of the geographical features, so it necessitated caution on Ellen's part. Though the fog cleared up within one koku, something surprising occurred.

Ludmira's Army had disappeared.

Burkina Plains was empty, even with the fog gone. The two thousand troops from Olmutz led by Ludmira were nowhere to be found.

Ellen sent scouts in all directions and soon found the whereabouts of the enemy.

"The colors of the Black Dragon (Zirnitra) Flag have been found in the Tatra Mountains. There are many barriers set up along the mountain path. It seems Ludmira-sama is preparing for a siege."

Ellen heard the report and groaned after sending the soldier away.

“We've been had...”

Ellen muttered to herself. Hearing this, Tigre frowned.

“Was this Ludmira's plan from the start?”

“That's right. Yesterday's fight was to have us focus on this area.”

The LeitMeritz Army quickly moved to the Tatra Mountains before day's end.

By the time they reached the base of the mountains, the day had mostly passed.

“This is no less steep than Vosyes.”

That was Tigre's first impression as he looked up the mountain.

Though it was nowhere as large as the Vosyes Mountain range, it was still quite high. At the end of the slope was a steep cliff.

Dark trees concealed the surface of the mountain. Bare rocks could be seen in various places, and snow covered

the land thickly, giving the mountain an even more steep appearance.

The scouts from the LeitMeritz Army were shot at from soldiers in the village at the foot of the mountain. They were forced to give many silver coins to the villagers to extract accurate information on the surroundings. By the time all was done, it was late in the evening.

“It seems Tatra Fortress is located at the summit of the mountain, and it's surrounded by step hills to the right, left, and behind it.”

Lim summarized the information and reported to Ellen in the tent.

“The entire mountain is steep, and when the locals go to hunt and forage for edible plants, they rarely leave the main path. Though there are other roads, they do not come out near the fortress. That is all they can tell us about the known paths.”

“What about a river leading deeper?”

Ellen guessed there would be some source of water leading to the fortress.

"It seems there is a waterfall in the center..."

--- So that's useless as well.

When Lim's report ended, Ellen left the tent and ordered her soldiers to remain on standby. She and Tigre approached the mountains.

The mountain path was heavily fortified as dictated by Ludmira. Large walls were built and wide trenches were dug. Fences made of hardened wood, stone, and soil were erected, and archers were established behind them.

There were many such defensive positions placed on the road.

Ellen spoke to Tigre while watching the path from a distance.

"How would you attack it?"

Tigre observed the defenses for a while and sighed.

--- Even if we make the soldiers charge, they will be hit with a storm of arrows while they move past the fences and trenches.

"It would take time, but what about some sort of battering ram or catapult?"

"That won't cut it with her. Ludmira could freeze the key locations with Lavias, and her gate will be harder than a poor castle gate. Can you reach the archers with your bow at that height?"

"Though it's possible, there wouldn't be much point in it."

From that height, they could simply obtain iron shields and defend themselves while shooting from the gaps. They would probably have replacements for anyone that was shot down, as well.

"What about the thing you used to kill the Earth Dragon (Suro)?"

Ludmira had already used Lavias' power. There was no reason for her not to use her own.

"Eh? Ah... The [Dragonic Skill (Veda)]. I can't do it."

While holding her silver-white hair, which had been disturbed by the wind, Ellen shrugged her shoulders deftly.

"You've seen it once. Do you know the weakness of my Dragonic Skill?"

Tigre tilted his head and looked up at the gray sky in thought.

He thought about how the Dragonic Skill which could obliterate a Dragon could have a weakness.

Seeing Tigre unable to come up with an answer for a long time, Ellen smiled and pointed at him with her finger.

"The first weakness is distance. It won't reach an enemy that is too far away. If we assume I use my Dragonic Skill before a trench, I would destroy the trench and blow away the fences and the walls; however, it would not reach the hill behind them. As for the other one---"

Ellen put up her second finger.

"The Dragonic Skill collects the surrounding winds. In that instant, the defense I have from the wind will not be effective. If arrows are shot at me during that time, I can't block them."

Tigre frowned. The location seemed to have been built specifically to oppose Ellen. Ellen noticed Tigre's face and shrugged her shoulders and smiled cynically.

“It's something Ludmira's grandmother thought of. She calculated that position specifically to counter Arifal, so it seems my predecessors suffered.”

The next day, the LeitMeritz Army attacked the mountain path upon which snow drifted about on countless occasions.

The enemy's arrows were blocked by shields, and the crossbows and arbalest prepared were not as effective as they expected.

Even if they managed to destroy the fence, a new one was installed, and with the frozen earth and cold air, further pursuit was impossible.

The Olmutz Army had no intent of leaving their position to fight. Those not fighting brought soil and stones to further strengthen the walls.

Furthermore, they had built a catapult to throw large rocks and barrels full of earth and sand. The LeitMeritz Army was forced to retreat.

The LeitMeritz Army repeatedly advanced and retreated in restless waves. The Olmutz Army stood like a large stone, neither moving forward nor backward.

It was simply a waste of time.

The battle had simply become a standoff. After several days, Ellen had become impatient.

On that day, their attack had ended in a failure. Tigre returned with the weary soldiers and gave words of appreciation before heading to the Commander's tent.

Once it came into view, he frowned. There should have been a few soldiers standing guard around it, but there was no one on watch.

Furthermore, he could hear quarreling inside.

His pace naturally quickened and he entered the tent.

"Then what else can we do!?"

Suddenly, Ellen's angry voice roared throughout the tent, taking Tigre by surprise.

Ellen had a passionate attitude as her bright red eyes glared at Lim. The adjutant with golden hair stood resolutely before the pressure exuded by the Vanadis.

"What's wrong? I can hear you even from outside."

Ellen looked at Tigre with a frown. Her expression quickly returned to one of a sulking child before she stomped her way across the tent and grabbed a bottle of wine in the corner. She quickly opened the bottle and drank its contents.

"What happened?"

He did not dare to lower his voice when he asked Lim. Lim responded with a relieved expression.

"Lord Tigrevurmud, please stop her. Eleanora-sama wants to attack their defensive position alone."

Tigre's mouth was half open in amazement. Tigre looked at Lim in blank surprise; there was no way the General of an army would be allowed to attack alone.

“It can't be helped.”

While gripping the bottle of wine, Ellen looked at Tigre with a sullen face.

“If it's me, I can fly over with Arifal. I can get behind their defense and cut down all the Olmutz soldiers.”

Tigre looked at her unreasonably. Naturally, Lim put a stop to her words.

“It is useless.”

“Then come up with another plan.”

“Though I have no other proposal, It is still useless.”

Though he thought it no different from a childish quarrel, Tigre spoke and made his assertion with a strong tone.

"Ludmira's grandmother thought of that. You said that yourself, right? In that case, even if you have many soldiers prepared, it wouldn't be a simple task."

"But we have no other choice! Many days have passed, and our situation has not changed. You should have faith in my swordsmanship."

Ellen was not budging at all. She stared at Tigre and walked forward. Using both hands, she grabbed Tigre's head, preventing him from moving.

"Did I let you go free too much? Tigre. Surely you haven't forgotten already. Who do you belong to?"

It was an intense atmosphere, and she pressed strongly against his skin. Tigre breathed slowly and answered.

"I belong to you."

"That's right. In that case, you should believe in me and let me do this, right?"

The passion in her red eyes nearly suffocated Tigre.

What Ellen said, while worrisome, was reasonable.

However, she was the General of the army. Even if the possibility of failure was small, she could not be recklessly exposed to danger.

--- Even if I told her to stop, she wouldn't. But we don't have any other plan, so what can I do?

He hesitated, but after some worrying, Tigre extended his hands. He shut his eyes and sandwiched Ellen's face with his hands as she had done to him. With Ellen's movements stopped for a moment, he quietly brought his head forward to hers. It was not an action he thought about, but something done naturally.

"Wha, Eh..."

Ellen was surprised, confused, and panicked. He could feel it in her voice through his palm.

Tigre let out a breath of relief in his mind because he did not feel anger from Ellen.

--- Since I did this so suddenly, I was prepared to get hit.

Even with such an abrupt reaction, he was not rejected ; she trusted him. All that remained was for him to force his words out through the tension.

He would properly communicate his feelings.

“You are important to me. Even if I were not yours, I don't think anything would change. It was my decision that pulled you to the battlefield, so I know I'm being selfish, but I don't want you to do anything reckless.”

Silence fell upon the tent. Since Tigre's eyes were closed, he could not understand Ellen's reaction.

Before long, Ellen's hands parted from Tigre.

“... Really.”

It was a small, trembling voice which reached Tigre's ear.

“Do you really cherish me?”

“Of course.”

“Do you cherish me the most?”

He found himself at a loss for words.

“... What did you just think of right now?”

Though it was not visible to Tigre, Lim was glaring at him from a distance. Tigre responded honestly in the dangerous atmosphere.

“Alsace.”

He heard a sigh. The two parted and Ellen took a step back. Tigre opened his eyes after losing the feel of her on his hand and saw Ellen smiling bitterly with her hands on her waist.

“You're a man with a strong love for his home. Well, that's fine. Alsace is mine as well.”

Just a moment ago, she was in such a bad mood that he would hesitate to call out to her, but it had vanished. Her cheerful smile and bright red eyes returned.

The Ellen Tigre and Lim were accustomed to seeing stood before them.

“By the way, if you had said a woman's name, you would be one head shorter. You've exercised your wisdom well. I'll praise you for that.”

Tigre shrugged his shoulders silently, though he was curious in the back of his mind. Ellen was a little red and spoke more rapidly than usual.

Tigre was a pubescent man of marriageable age, so he may have been aware of Ellen as a member of the opposite sex.

However, there were other things to do first. He needed to tie up all loose ends.

"By the way, I had a favor I wanted to ask of you."

Each time he took a step forward, a heavy sound echoed from below. The sky had not changed at all, and an almost pure-white snow covered the ground. Occasionally, his feet slid against ice rather than snow.

His body was wrapped in a fur mantle as he walked along the frozen surface. Tigre vaguely thought the fur was double layered to keep the cold away. The white breath he expelled was nearly invisible against the snow.

His hat was made from the head of a bear. To be more exact, the entire headpiece was fashioned to act as headgear. Holes were placed in the eyes and ears to allow him to see and hear, and the mouth was open so he could speak.

It was something Lim lent to him.

"This is what I brought as protection against the cold."

She told Tigre this as she covered his head. Though it was a little tight, he could barely feel the cold seeping up from his neck.

He carefully progressed toward a tree not buried in snow. He leaned against it to rest when he reached it and was tempted to sit down.

He took a flask from his waist and drank some water.

--- This is the third day.

That was how long it had been since Tigre entered the Tatra Mountains.

He asked Ellen to allow him to search for a mountain path that would head to the top of the mountain.

“Weren't you just trying to prevent me from acting alone?”

Ellen spoke sarcastically, though her tone was slightly peevish. Eventually she consented.

“However... Will you really be fine?”

She glanced at him anxiously. Tigre simply struck his chest proudly to reassure her.

It was not a lie. He was accustomed to climbing steep mountains in Alsace.

Even if he was found by the enemy, he could evade them by acting as a hunter. His form was that of a hunter , and he had knowledge as a hunter himself. He had confirmed there were snow leopards throughout the mountains by asking the people in the village.

He was suddenly hit by a bout of drowsiness, and his body leaned over.

Tigre put strength to his legs and hit his head to awaken himself. The cold had sapped his stamina, and the weight of the snow only made him more fatigued.

--- I don't have much food. There's enough water, since I found a river...

He was anxious as well. After leaving Alsace, many days had passed, and Duke Thenardier would soon begin his movements.

--- But I came here of my own accord.

When looking down from a cliff overhead, Tigre had learned he had come quite a ways up the mountain.

--- I have one day left at most...

After finishing his rest, Tigre resumed his walk through the snow.

He saw a fox far away. It was about five chet (approximately fifty centimeters) in size.

Perhaps it had been distracted by something, as it had stopped in its place. After secretly hiding his body with a nearby tree, Tigre quickly nocked an arrow.

If he killed it, it would give him a sufficient amount of food.

The distance to the fox was two hundred alsin (approximately two hundred meters). It would be no problem, even if it was slightly higher on the gentle slope .

He bent his bowstring and shot the arrow.

By the time his bowstring stopped vibrating, the arrow had pierced the fox's head.

“... What?”

Tigre tilted his head. The fox collapsed in an odd way. At any rate, Tigre continued to walk toward it while paying careful attention to his steps. When he had

walked half the distance, he noticed a small shadow appear near where the fox fell. It was a petite girl.

--- Ludmira...!?

She was the stern girl he had met in Rodnick and was now his enemy, the blue-haired Vanadis. Though it was odd to see a casually dressed girl in the snow-covered mountains, he could accept it if it were her.

Tigre stopped his feet and intently observed her. Ludmira noticed him and remained where she stood.

--- Is she waiting for me?

Though he thought of running away, he would only seem suspicious.

--- My face is hidden, and I'm disguised as a hunter as we planned.

He was truly grateful to Lim for the bear headgear and wished to thank her from the bottom of his heart. The snow sounded noisily as Tigre climbed the slope.

Like he thought, it was Ludmira.

She wore the same blue clothes decorated with red and gold. In her hand was a commonplace bow. Her spear of ice was thrust violently into the nearby ground.

She smiled in a carefree manner, without malice or hostility.

She seemed not to have noticed that it was Tigre.

"Did you shoot this arrow?"

Ludmira spoke in a tone many would consider haughty as she pointed to the fox. The fox had an arrow through its head and in the scruff of its neck. Her finger pointed to the arrow in its head.

--- So that's how it is.

Ludmira was keeping an eye on this fox as well. Their arrows had hit at nearly the same time. Though unusual, it was not unique.

Tigre tilted his quiver to show his arrows. It was clear to understand seeing the fletching on his arrows.

--- Even so...

Tigre spoke, his voice clearly showing his worry.

“Um... Aren't you cold?”

Though she wore clothes with luxurious decorations, her arms, legs, and abdomen were exposed. It was not suitable for walking through the snowy mountains.

“I am fine, because I am a special existence.”

Ludmira pushed her chest forward slightly and answered proudly. Tigre was taken aback as she looked at him with shining eyes the color of the deep sea.

“By the way, you seemed to have walked a fair distance. Where did you hit this beast from?”

Tigre looked back to where he walked from and pointed at the tree where he hid and took aim at the fox. Ludmira's expression rapidly became sharp.

“Stop lying, commoner. That is beyond two hundred alsin, is it not? And such small game...”

Tigre shrugged his shoulders and retrieved an arrow from his quiver. He knew at times like this that it would be best to show her directly.

The bowstring trembled as he fired the arrow. He struck the tree as intended, shaking the snow which had accumulated on the branches.

As he looked back, he felt a childish sense of satisfaction. Ludmira stared at the arrow with her mouth half open.

Before long, Ludmira turned back and apologized to Tigre in an awkward manner.

"... I, I apologize. I doubted your words."

--- Like I thought, this girl can admit her own errors.

Tigre was glad to have learned of her merits, if only a little bit.

"By the way, how should we divide this? Shall we divide it in two?"

Ludmira pointed to the fox with the bow in her hand. Her arrow was stuck in the fox's neck.

"... I suppose we should divide it evenly in this situation."

"That is fine with me. Ah, I will give the meat to you, since it is unnecessary. I simply want the fur."

"Then you may have the fur. I will take the rest."

He could eat the meat and entrails and cut the bones down into arrowheads. There were other uses as well. Though he would like the fur, it was not a problem if he did not have it.

"Very well."

Ludmira smiled brightly and held out her hand. Tigre grasped it tightly as he recalled Ellen's cheerful smile.

He removed the fox meat, chopped it up, and cooked it in a small pan.

They had moved a short distance from where they met , closer to the river. The two decided to take a rest while Tigre took care of the fox.

Though it took time to ignite the firewood in the snow, he had managed to get it started. In the mountains, after the sun had passed its zenith and began to descend, the two surrounded the pan.

"Why is it that you do not take off your headgear? You should have no problem with the snow or cold when you are near me."

Ludmira asked Tigre curiously as he skinned the fox.

As she had said, they were free from the cold, unrelated to the fire.

--- Most likely, this is the power of her Dragonic Viralt Tool.

It was a spear that manipulated the cold and the reason Ludmira could walk around the snowy mountains in such light clothing.

"Could it be... you are a Vanadis?"

It would seem unnatural not to question Ludmira's words, so Tigre carefully asked her. She looked at Tigre in dissatisfaction.

"Though you are right... You have no sense of humility , really."

Tigre hesitated and thought about what he should do. He thought it may have been best to prostrate himself before her.

“No matter. I will pardon it out of respect for your skill with the bow. I shall forgive your rudeness.”

Tigre let out a breath of relief and bowed slightly. After that, he noticed Ludmira's glance and placed his finger to his headgear.

“In my village, we are not to take this off while hunting in the mountains.”

It was an old story he heard from his father. Tigre gave an appropriate response using the information he could remember.

“I see. How regrettable. I would like to see your face.”

Ludmira spoke earnestly. Tigre remained silent, but he was sweating beneath the mask.

If she learned of his identity, he would not escape the mountain alive. Even if she took mercy on him on a whim, she would certainly confine him in the castle dungeon.

--- She really hasn't noticed.

She simply thought of him as a simple hunter and stopped pursuing the matter. The only thing between the two was a small pan.

If she were further from the spear and he caught her off guard, he could pin her down. As soon as he thought that far, however, Tigre shook the thought out of his head. His chances of victory were too slim, and he could not easily ambush this girl who spoke to him sincerely and kindly. Ludmira suddenly called out to Tigre.

"What is your name?"

"... Urz."

Tigre used his father's name.

"I see. Urz. Serve me."

Ludmira spoke as if it were a matter of course.

"Your skill with the bow is wonderful. That alone is valuable enough to allow you to serve me."

"... I am not a hunter from nearby. I came from far away."

He spoke in intervals, but Tigre was able to squeeze out his words.

"I see. It would be strange not to have heard of you if you were a man from Olmutz."

"I have no plans of leaving my home."

Tigre was able to speak his true feelings without telling a lie.

Tigre felt guilty using his father's name to lie to Ludmira.

--- This girl, her attitude aside, she frankly accepted me.

Ludmira's words contained no lies. Perhaps because she thought of Tigre as a commoner, she was, in her own way, receiving him on equal footing.

--- If she looked down on commoners, I would have probably been made to leave quickly without the fox. No, it would be possible she would have forced me to carry it to the fortress.

If an aristocrat in Brune were greedy, such as Duke Thenardier, he may have been punished for damaging the fox.

Eventually, Tigre finished dismantling the fox. Though he was tired and cut corners on occasion, 70% of the skin still remained. Tigre explained the circumstances to Ludmira.

"For the fine details, please give it to a specialist to handle."

"I understand. Thank you for your work."

After that, Tigre and Ludmira ate a little of the fox meat. He washed away the blood and seasoned it with salt. Ludmira did not particularly complain.

The pan was easily washed with melted snow before being placed in his bag. The extra meat and offal were buried in a hole. In the meantime, Ludmira put a new pot to boil after washing it out with water.

--- Is she drinking hot water?

Though Tigre thought that, he felt it was something different after a time. Ludmira opened two crystal bottles held at her waist and placed what appeared to be dry, black seeds into a cup.

When she poured the hot water into it, the water became slightly red.

She then scooped jam from the other bottle and placed it in the hot red water and waited for it to melt away.

"Have a drink."

Tigre received the steaming cup. Perhaps it was due to the natural atmosphere, or perhaps it was her attitude, for some reason, he was unable to refuse.

"It is tea. It will warm your body and your mind."

Tigre took care not to burn himself and gingerly sipped the tea.

A mysterious smell stimulated his nasal cavity. The bitterness and sweetness spread to his tongue. The fatigue collected in his body seemed to disappear all at once.

“... It's delicious.”

Without thinking, he muttered those words. Ludmira's face quickly glowed with joy.

“It is, right? If you want another drink, I will especially pour it for you.”

Ludmira's chest puffed out with pride as she smiled innocently. Tigre asked for another cup upon her insistence.



--- So she can smile like this as well.

Whenever he took a sip, his body was warmed from the inside. Ludmira watched Tigre drink the tea with an elated expression.

After they had finally rested, Ludmira turned to look at Tigre with interest.

"Urz. Why are you here? You should have some idea of what is going on. There are many soldiers walking about the mountain paths, and it is clear this is a battlefield."

"There are certain animals lurking about the mountains that only appear at these times."

"I am amazed. I did not think a person would come to such a place. I will have to rethink things."

Though dangerous words were about to come out of his mouth, he swallowed them back down.

"Why is a Vanadis here? Why would you come here without your attendants?"

"... It is an exception."

Ludmira, who had always held a high-handed attitude , showed a weak expression for the first time. Her short blue hair shook as she gazed into the distance.

"I just wanted to relax."

"... If you are satisfied with me, I will listen."

After hesitating, Tigre said those words.

If he were to bid farewell, he would have to leave quickly. He could not overlook Ludmira's lonely profile.

Ludmira looked at Tigre in surprise.

"If you can't speak, then vent into the hollow of a tree. It is an old saying."

"--- You are quite gentle for a bear."

Ludmira held her knees and gazed upward at Tigre. It was a gesture matching a normal young girl.

Before long, Ludmira gradually spoke.

She had pride as a Vanadis that succeeded down the generations of her family. Because of her position, she had subdued her own emotions to maintain relations with a person she hated.

In particular, Ludmira vented her anger like a raging fire when she spoke of Duke Thenardier handing out the armor from her territory to the bandits.

“I was able to hunt alone today... I think the soldiers will forgive me. I need at least a little time to relax and distract myself.”

Though there were places Tigre appeared in her story, he never spoke up. He simply nodded and responded to her occasional question.

Even if it was for his own safety, he hid his identity from her.

Speaking any more simply seemed cowardly.

“Urz. I will remember your name. You are always welcome to come to the Imperial Palace in Olmutz.”

Ludmira left him with those words as the two separated. She held the fox with her spear and walked away at a light pace along the snowy ground.

--- Is that also the power of the spear? She can walk so easily on this snow-covered mountain.

After her figure had become distant, Tigre changed his thought process and began to follow her footsteps. Ludmira would not likely notice at this distance, but he still remained cautious as he slowly advanced.

The sun had hidden itself on the other side of the mountain. Only its afterglow illuminated the hill.

--- Not good. Once the sun sets, I won't be able to follow her .

While fighting his impatience, Tigre kept his pace and advanced, little by little. This was his last chance.

His legs lacked strength, and his breath was frozen.

By the time the sun set, Tigre stood atop a cliff. There was a fortress beneath his eyes.

He quietly spent the night in the mountains and descended in the morning.

“You have a terrible face.”

They were the words Ellen greeted Tigre with when he returned. Tigre's words were not normal, either.

“Please let me sleep for half a day.”

He had put off shaving, eating, and changing his clothes. Tigre collapsed the moment he entered the tent and slept as he was.

The position of the LeitMeritz Army had not changed while Tigre was climbing the mountain. Though they had not changed their method of attacking the mountain path, they had not achieved any significant results. They had not even made their way past the first defensive line.

Still, Ellen and Lim continued to attack to provide as much support as possible for Tigre while he surveyed the mountain.

The sun had set, and the attack that day had ended in a pointless manner. Tigre finally awoke.

He quickly ate fish soup alone and shaved himself, leaving a few scratches along his jaw. When Tigre was finally finished, he returned to the tent and sat in a circle with Ellen and Lim.

"... I'm back."

Ellen teased him with her gaze at this late hour and listened to him seriously.

"You slept and ate quite well. So how did it go? Did you find anything?"

"Two hundred... no, one hundred people can be taken up to the castle. Then we need to take the gate down."

Perhaps because the defense of the mountain path was not perfect, the defense of the fort itself was not particularly special. The defenses which had plagued Ellen were not installed around the fort, nor were there many soldiers standing guard at the gate or patrolling the walls.

Even without siege weapons like battering rams, they could pass the wall by using a hook and a rope ladder according to Tigre's judgment.

"Well done!"

After hearing his story, Ellen gave her evaluation and hit Tigre's shoulder. She then cheerfully spoke her instructions to Lim.

"... Is it fine? With only one hundred people?"

"It will be enough. They have two thousand troops, and at least half of them are on the mountain path, leaving fewer than one thousand within the fortress. They are likely guarding the other mountain paths on shifts. This should not change if we continue our attacks here. At that time---"

Ellen shut one eye, but her other eye had enough spirit to fill both.

"When the time comes, I will prove to you that I can hold down Ludmira and her one thousand men. I will show you the strength of the Vanadis."

"How reliable."

Ellen's mood lifted when it came to a fight. Tigre noticed it had happened to him before he was aware of it.

After that, Tigre told them he met Ludmira.

“Were you noticed?”

“I owe it to this headpiece.”

While he replied jokingly, Lim looked down in silence with a red face. Tigre smiled wryly seeing her reaction and returned to the conversation. He did not specifically speak of their conversation, but told them he had been treated to tea. Though Ellen clearly frowned, she did not complain; however, she did speak up at the end.

“Carrying tea and jam at a time like that. She really is funny.”

Tigre was also in agreement.

They quickly made preparations. Early the next morning one hundred LeitMeritz cavalry, led by Tigre and Ellen, used the morning mist to approach the foot of the Tatra Mountains.

Lim took command of the remaining soldiers and attacked the mountain path. Though dissatisfaction clearly showed in her blue eyes, she followed directions while maintaining her expressionless facade.

Though there were only one hundred cavalry, it was difficult to travel along the mountain without a road. The soldiers did not wear armor but a combination of fur and leather. There were many who were injured as their feet slipped and the rocks fell on top of them.

They tied their bodies together with rope as they advanced up the slopes which had been covered in ice halfway up. Ellen encouraged the soldiers, and Tigre directed the work. Slowly, the LeitMeritz soldiers moved across the snow-covered mountain.

When the eastern sky was dyed indigo and the sun invaded the western sky, they had reached where Tigre stood several days ago.

They looked down at the castle fort before their eyes.

However, something unexpected occurred.

“... Tigre, you said the security wasn't tight.”

When Tigre had looked at the gate on the other side of the fortress days ago, there was no one in sight.

However, a defensive line had been constructed before the gate. Though there were no hills, and the trenches were not deep, the threat it provided still remained.

In addition, the number of soldiers on the rampart had increased. Some remained stationary with bow in hand.

“Strange. There was nothing like that before.”

“Ludmira probably came up with the idea when she met you.”

Ellen looked down at the fortress with a grim expression.

Though he had a superior skill as a hunter, he was a free person who was not a Vanadis. All alone, he had managed to climb the mountain on a snow-covered path. Seeing this, Ludmira had changed her defenses. It was not a mystery at all.

“What should we do? Give up and return?”

Tigre carefully asked her. Ellen folded her arms and shook her head strongly as she refused him.

"If we turn back here, all our efforts would come to waste. I absolutely do not want that."

Tigre gazed at Ellen in surprise having heard her make such a frank declaration. Ellen looked back and spoke once again.

"I will destroy the gate."

"It is too dangerous. They will hit you with arrows from the ramparts."

Tigre gripped Ellen's shoulder and stared at her.

"What, it's not like I'll be injured."

Ellen waved her hand as if pushing the matter aside. She grasped Tigre's neck and drew him closer as Tigre tried to argue again.

Ellen lightly pressed her forehead against his.

"You need to give me the chance to look good on occasion."

She whispered and smiled brightly as she removed her hand from Tigre.

"Watch, Tigre. I will destroy everything before the castle gate in a single blow. I will take care of the gate with my second attack."

Certainly, under the present circumstances, there was no other hand they could play. Tigre bit down on his lips , strong enough that blood began to flow, and glared at the black bow in his hand.

--- What do I need to do to get you to help me again?

He understood it was a selfish wish to ask of something he feared.

Tigre wanted to do something for Ellen.

Soon, the sun sank completely.

Under the cover of darkness, the LeitMeritz troops carefully moved down the steep slope. They used rope to prevent themselves from falling and covered their swords in dirt to cover their shine.

When all members were set and their numbers confirmed by Ellen and Tigre, Ellen spoke to her soldiers in her typical tone.

"I will wrench the gate open. You will rush in at that time."

Her words were short, and there was no other feasible plan. The soldiers did not object, nor did they show any doubt. They had complete faith in Ellen, the Wind Princess of the Silver Flash (Silvfrau).

"May the Dragon bring us victory."

After completing her instructions, Ellen turned to the castle gate.

She made her soldiers stand aside and quietly walked forward alone.

In the light of the bonfire near the gates, the Olmutz soldiers noticed Ellen. As they began to call out and prepare their weapons, Ellen ran lightly across the snow and frozen ground and unsheathed the longsword at her waist.

"--- Arifal."

Following her cry, the blade of the longsword glowed with a pale light. The frozen air was stolen from the mountains and surrounded the sword. A loud groan was

heard, and the glowing light drew a brilliant trajectory in the darkness.

Ley Admos
"Cleave the Wind!"

The wind condensed to a point and turned into an invisible iron hammer that was thrown forward. The earth and sand was blown away, the trenches were buried in dirt, and the fences were shattered. As the wind closed in on the city gate, it scattered in all directions, losing its power.

"The enemy!"

Many shouts were heard on the ramparts as they shot their arrows at Ellen.

Ellen did not move from her position as she protected her head with her empty left arm. She did not use the wind to defend herself as she continued to collect the wind with her longsword.

Several arrows grazed her arms and legs as they fell from above.

"Ellen!"

Mud was thrown aside as Tigre ran and jumped at Ellen from behind. He pushed her down to provide cover for her. An arrow glanced off his shoulder as he fell. Inside the torrent of arrows, Tigre grabbed Ellen's body and dragged her to a distance the arrows would not reach.

“What are you doing, Tigre. My second attack---”

Ellen began protesting in frustration but was silenced by Tigre's voice.

“Why did you lie to me?”

“... I just didn't tell you.”

Ellen looked like a sulking child as she turned away, causing Tigre to speak in irritation.

“Your Dragonic Veḍa Skill, you can't use it continuously?”

Ellen frowned and closed her mouth, but, pressured by Tigre's glance, she reluctantly answered him.

“I need about a ten count...”

Tigre had to force down the anger welling from the bottom of his heart. If he did not, he may have hit Ellen.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“We don't have any time.”

Tigre shut his mouth and his anger disappeared in an instant. It was not Ellen that lacked time, but Tigre.

Ellen did something unreasonable for Tigre and resorted to keeping it a secret.

Torches could be seen dotting the ramparts as soldiers began gathering.

--- *What should I do? I need to do something.*

Tigre grasped his bow tightly, enough to feel pain in his hand. His hand was stained red from the blood that flowed down from his shoulder.

He wanted to repay her kindness, but he needed power. He needed the same strength she used when she felled the Dragon. He needed the strength he had when they killed the Dragon together.

At that moment, Tigre stopped breathing.

--- *Maybe I can.*

Tigre removed his gaze from Ellen and looked at the Silver Flash in her hand.

“I'm asking you. Your power. Please lend it to me.”

Tigre desperately appealed to the longsword.

“Your Master is Ellen. Though your relation with Ellen is good, there is no direct connection between us; however, I know you have your own will. I'm asking you . You may not be able to hear what I say, you may not want to hear---”

At that time, a breeze stroked Tigre's dull red hair.

Tigre thought it was the Silver Flash's answer.

“Can you stand?”

While supporting Ellen's body, Tigre stared at the castle gate. Ellen seemed puzzled as she looked between Tigre and the sword in her hand.

After taking a breath, Ellen firmly stood and smiled at Tigre.

“I was right to cooperate with you.”

She pointed the Silver Flash at the castle gate.

“At this distance, my Dragonic Veda Skill won't reach, but that should be fine.”

The next attack would not be her Dragonic Skill. At least, it would not be done by Ellen.

“Arifal. I'm disappointed at how flirtatious you're being... Well, it's fine if it's just this guy.”

Her bright red eyes glittered with determination. The long sword called the Silver Flash let loose a pale blue light once again. Tigre and Ellen stood beside one another and stared at the castle gate.

One nocked an arrow to his bow and drew the bowstring back. The other extended her hand which held a shining sword. Their aim was the thick iron gate.

The soldiers on the rampart stopped firing as they looked curiously at Tigre. They knew the power of the

Silver Flash would not reach them, let alone a bow and arrow.

The next moment, they stood aghast as if they had seen a nightmare.

A wind flowed from the Silver Flash to the arrow nocked in Tigre's bow.

A glowing air current surrounded the arrow; the light pulsated, spreading radially from the arrowhead.

--- I didn't hear a voice this time, but...

It was enough. Tigre firmly believed in his bow and arrow.

The arrow was silent the moment he released it.

The light changed from a circle to a line as it followed the speeding arrow. A shrill sound tore through the atmosphere as it cut across the air.

The debris of the fences and walls were torn aside without a sound, and a deep groove was born.

The ground was split, and the arrow pierced the center of the castle gate. There was a jarring metallic sound as a light vibration was felt across the rampart.

Several soldiers looked at the walls suspiciously.

There was no abnormality in the castle gate, though it was only for a single instant.

Suddenly, a circular light spread from the arrow. As if following after the light, the iron gate became hollow. The bolts supporting it from the inside were cleanly cut.

The iron door had hollowed out and was cleanly divided between the two doors. The fragments fell to the ground, shaking the earth in the process.

The soldiers looked in shock as they looked at the circular hole in the gate. Their thoughts stopped; no one could take action.

The gate was made of three iron sheets sandwiched between thick oak planks. Even then, it had a hole in it, as if it were cut by a cookie cutter.

The hole was large enough that a wagon could pass through with room to spare. The freezing wind easily blew inside.

Ellen was the first to collect herself. She did not miss the pause in the enemy's movements and lifted the Silver Flash to the sky while giving a cry.

“Charge!”

Next to her, Tigre nocked a new arrow. One hundred cavalry followed the two inside.

The night battle in the Tatra Mountains had just begun .

One man watched the dogfight with a gloomy expression from behind. However, his target was not her but the man with dull red hair.

Six of his companions were gone. He was now alone. Even so, the man focused his mind on the enormous prey , the Vanadis.

Along the man's left arm was a tattoo of a large chain.

Ludmira was surprised when she received the report that Ellen appeared in the castle interior; however, she was rendered speechless when she found how they had passed the castle gate. She stood stunned for a short time.

--- What is the meaning of this? Eleanora should not have been able to break through so soon...!

However, there was no time to be surprised, nor was there room to think. Ludmira quickly dashed out of the command room while gripping the Frozen Wave. She ran at full speed toward the battlefield.

Elsewhere, the Olmutz soldiers near the gates took appropriate action once they recovered from their surprise. In other words, they abandoned the gates.

Even if they left the castle gate, there was a canal through which the river passed. There was a bridge over the canal; they would fend off the enemy there.

However, if it came to an exchange of sword and spear , the LeitMeritz soldiers would be stronger. They did not think they could fight this number so easily, so there was a hint of distress.

Each had become a ferocious beast as they violently attacked the enemy. They battered the enemy's helmet or pierced through them with a spear. Even if their swords were broken, they fought on with what little blade remained or brandished weapons they took from the surrounding corpses.

The Olmutz soldiers would not back away either. They had been invaded, so they could not possibly retreat. They crushed the enemy with battle axes and slammed into them with broken shields.

Corpses from both sides dropped one after another into the moat. It would soon be completely full.

However, the battle was not even.

Though the Olmutz troops fought back, they were forced to retreat repeatedly.

The LeitMeritz soldiers were energetic because Ellen, the Silver Flash, had taken lead.

Her hair of silver white fluttered through the air and brilliantly reflected the light. Olmutz soldiers fell one after the other as her longsword glittered. Her movements were like a dance. Every person could see the beauty in her ghastly actions.

Tigre stood next to Ellen, shooting arrows. Every time his bowstring sounded, a soldier or Commander from the rear was sent to his death.

His accuracy was frightening. In the darkness of the night, with only the dim light of the surrounding torches, Tigre's arrows brought a guaranteed slaughter to the soldiers in the back. Tigre's arrows killed with certainty.

There were some who noticed Tigre's existence. Though some tried to shoot him, their arrows fell short or were deflected into the moat, leaving only a modest sound as they fell into the water.

Unexpectedly, the Olmutz soldiers divided to the right and left, forming a narrow road.

“Eleanora!”

It was a shout of anger. Lavias was held upward as Ludmira charged forward on her horse.

The longsword clashed with the spear. A screeching sound split the atmosphere, and a flash burned the soldiers' eyes.

“Fall back!”

No one knew whether Eleanora or Ludmira said the words. Perhaps they had given the order simultaneously.

The soldiers stopped fighting and spread out, forming a ring. They would not interfere with the duel between their Lords.

Though Tigre had stopped, he did not move away from the bridge.

Though closer than anyone else, he could not follow the fight.

“To think you would show up personally, and with such an ungraceful appearance, as well?”

"I came to give my thanks. I'm indebted to you for that time."

While measuring the distance, Ellen responded with a serious expression. After confirming Ludmira's suspicious expression, the Vanadis with silver-white hair smiled audaciously.

"By the way, I've brought you a present. Please accept your defeat gracefully."

"--- I will refuse. I will send you back to LeitMeritz encased in ice!"

Again the two clashed. A blinding light was released with every exchange of blows. The sword and spear drew white arcs in the darkness. The pressure caused wounds, and the collisions deafened the ear.

The exchange of offense and defense continued. Heat and light were emitted by the two, and the cold air was sucked into the darkness of the night.

--- Has there ever been a person to fight with Ellen for so long?

Tigre held his breath as he watched the battle between the two Vanadis. When he fought in the fortress, and when he fought against the Thenardier Army, there was never a person who had exchanged blows with Ellen more than ten times.

Ludmira skillfully manipulated her short spear, and violently thrust her weapon before her, clashing with Ellen's own attack.

After the unexpected collision between Dragonic Viralt Tools , Ellen and Ludmira jumped back simultaneously.

A fearless smile floated to Ellen's lips.

“Cleave the Wind Ley Admos !”

Arifal inhaled the winds in the surroundings and formed a brutal blade that shot forward; however, it was not aimed toward Ludmira. The bridge was crushed, and debris fell into the water below.

The bridge had been torn in half.

Ignoring the disastrous scene before her, Ludmira began to run. Even with the gap before her, she showed no signs of hesitation.

"Shero Zam Kafa
Freeze the Sky!"

The air froze in an instant and large blocks of ice connected to form a bridge. Rather than staying put, Ellen stepped forward and moved along the ice bridge before her. Several spears of ice formed and attacked her while Ludmira slid along the ice and approached Ellen, her spear thrust before her.

Ellen's feet left the bridge and were wrapped in wind. She avoided the spear of ice and gripped Ludmira's sleeve as she passed to the side, dragging her down from the bridge.

Ludmira gazed at the water as her body approached the surface. She brought the tip of her spear forcefully into the surface of the water where it stuck.

"Aizbilk
--- Silent World"

Beginning at the tip of Lavias, the water froze at a frightening speed. Using her spear as a fulcrum, Ludmira twisted her body and landed on the icy scaffold.

"As always, you fight in such an unrefined manner."

Ludmira looked at Ellen with icy eyes. Ellen brought her longsword to her shoulder and responded calmly.

"I fight to win. I don't bother choosing a specific method, nor am I burdened by such useless things. Regardless---"

She laughed scornfully as she looked down at Ludmira.

"As someone who always looks down on others, how does it feel to be looked down upon? No, I suppose if you consider our heights, this is the same as always."

"--- Lavias!"

Ludmira responded with fury and grasped the handle of her spear. She disappeared in an instant as the handle of her spear grew, rising above the bridge with surprising swiftness. She danced high above in the air.

While in midair, the spear shaft returned to its former short length. Ludmira yelled aloud as she fell toward Ellen, using the momentum of her fall to aid her.

Lavias froze the surrounding air. In an instant, a huge blade of ice appeared at the tip of the spear.

Ellen thought to avoid it and held the Silver Flash toward Ludmira in anticipation.

However, Ellen's energy had been quite spent, so she decided not to dodge.

Arifal inhaled the wind, clothing its argent blade in numerous swirls. A large blade of wind in no way inferior to Lavias was formed.

--- *This is the end!*

--- *I will take victory!*

"Cut and Sever, Silver Flash!" Arifal

"Pierce, Frozen Wave!" Lavias

The torrent of wind crushed all in its wake; the large crystals drilled into all that was touched.

The storm prevented the ice from piercing Ellen, while the blocks of ice prevented the storm from attacking Ludmira.

The two huge beasts tore at each others' flesh.

The beasts were exhausted at the same moment.

The air expanded, and a sound, similar to a thunderstorm, burst through the air. Ellen was blown away and fell to her knee. Ludmira landed on the bridge in a similar pose.

Though Tigre stepped forward to help Ellen stand, the Vanadis with argent hair shouted, sensing his movements.

“Stay away, Tigre.”

Tigre stopped moving.

“Relax. It's over already.”

Ellen stood up unsteadily and gazed at Ludmira. Ludmira used her spear to support her as she rose. She controlled her subordinates with her hand as they rushed to help her.

The two dragged their injured bodies within distance. Their arms trembled in exhaustion.

At that time, one man ran out from amongst the LeitMeritz soldiers who watched the battle in silence. Though he wore soldier's garment, he carried a dagger soaked in poison; he was clearly not a soldier.

Ludmira noticed the man's existence before Ellen.

The Vanadis with blue hair, without any hesitation, summoned all her strength and ran to Ellen's side. She stood behind Ellen, protecting her back. Cries of grief and despair were heard from soldiers of both armies.



Even if Ludmira interfered, the man would not hesitate. The blade in his hand glittered as he posed to stab Ludmira.

The next moment, the man's body flew sideways.

He smashed into the bridge with an arrow piercing through his head before falling into the moat. Ludmira saw the shape of the feathers.

--- *Just now...*

Ludmira turned her gaze to where the arrow was shot from.

One young man with dull red hair stood posed, a black bow in his hand.

“That was close, Tigre.”

Ellen's words contained joy. Ludmira looked at Tigre with a vacant face before turning back to Ellen.

“What's with that face? Don't tell me you forgot what Tigre looked like.”

Ludmira did not listen to Ellen's words to the end. She walked up to Tigre and looked up at him with anger clearly visible in her eyes the color of the deep sea.

“You lied to me, Urz.”

Tigre turned pale and was at a loss for words after seeing Ludmira's expression. Ludmira continued to speak quietly.

“I saw the arrows.”

“... Sorry.”

Ludmira mercilessly beat Tigre as he bowed.

“Why are you apologizing? Why did you help me here ? With your bow arm, you could have easily waited for me to die before killing the assassin. Why did you help me?”

She looked at him sharply. Tigre churned his dull red hair with a somber expression.

“It was a show of my gratitude, I guess.”

“Gratitude?”

Ludmira frowned. Tigre continued speaking after he gave his preface.

"--- The tea was delicious. It isn't simple flattery. It really was good."

Tigre was tired, and Ludmira was good at brewing tea. However, more than anything, Ludmira had spoken to Tigre as a girl, not as a Vanadis.

That is why the tea was so delicious.

Ludmira quietly looked at Tigre's face for a time. She would not overlook any change in his emotions.

Eventually, she sighed as her body lost strength.

"Earl Vorn. What is it you request of me?"

Ludmira was not asking in an arrogant manner but with a character befitting a graceful princess.

"Do you wish for me to fight Duke Thenardier with you?"

Tigre shook his head.

"Declare your neutrality and do not move. There is nothing more I desire."

"... Only that?"

Ludmira frowned beautifully, hearing an unconvincing answer.

"Do you not need allies?"

"I do; however, there is nothing beneficial if you were to fight alongside me. I could not possibly ask this of you when you have nothing to gain."

"In other words, you do not have any intent to fight for your personal gain?"

"Honestly, even Alsace is too wide for me. I'm fine so long as it is peaceful."

Ludmira looked surprised. After staring intently at Tigre for a time, Ludmira smiled bitterly.

"Are you seriously saying that?"

"Of course."

He gave an immediate response. Ludmira looked down. Her shoulders shook, little by little, until she burst into laughter. The soldiers, Ellen, and Tigre watched in astonishment.

After a short period of time, Ludmira finished laughing. She looked up with an expression as sharp and cold as her spear.

“Earl Vorn. Sincerity is important, but it does not work in every situation.”

Though Tigre did not show it on his face, he was filled with bitter emotions. He thought about whether it was useless. While deep in thought, Ludmira smiled musingly at Tigre.

“However, your sincerity is enough this time. For this civil war in Brune, I will declare neutrality from this moment forward and will not cooperate with any power – is that enough?”

Tigre felt relieved. While he began to give his thanks, Ellen stood before Tigre, pushing Ludmira aside.

“Wait, Tigre. Don't decide without talking to me first.”

Her hands were at her waist and she was clearly dissatisfied. No doubt, it was resentment that came from his neglect at the moment; however, Ludmira detected a certain emotion within her words.

"Oh? Could you be jealous, Eleanora?"

"I'll knock you down, shorty."

With another clash between the two about to unfold, Tigre broke into a panic and stood between them. He felt as though he stood between a wolf and a leopard.

"Ludmira, I would like to say one more thing."

Tigre spoke hastily, which softened the dangerous atmosphere. Feeling relief, Tigre turned to the Vanadis with blue hair and bowed with a smile.

"Thank you. For protecting Ellen."

"...!"

Ludmira was aware of the action she had performed before. She blushed, and her eyes wandered about the surroundings. Ellen walked in front of Ludmira with an indescribably awkward expression.

"... Th, Thank you."

Though she stammered, she still gave thanks.

Ludmira overreacted and cried out with enough vigor that saliva flew through the air.

"I, I do not need you to thank me!"

The war had finally ended.

Epilogue

Ludmira bore all damages from the battle.

Ludmira had made a promise with Tigre to declare her neutrality. This had a powerful effect in both Brune and Zhcted. Duke Thenardier had lost a powerful ally.

“We will meet again.”

At the border between LeitMeritz and Olmutz, Tigre and Ellen shook hands with Ludmira before separating.

“I have many things I must apologize for.”

“There's no need to worry. I spoke poorly a number of times as well.”

Tigre laughed and spoke in a joking tone.

“Earl Vorn. When your fight ends, please stop by Olmutz. I will serve you an even more delicious tea.”

“Unfortunately, Tigre will never be going to Olmutz again. How regrettable.”

Without hiding her annoyance, Ellen pulled on Tigre's sleeve as she moved forward on her horse. When he looked back at Ludmira, about ten steps away, he saw Ludmira glaring at her with her tongue stuck out.

Tigre was amazed to see her far-too-childish gesture. He heard Ludmira speak; however, the words were directed more toward Ellen than Tigre.

“If you get tired of that woman, I will always welcome you.”

“Tigre is mine!”

Ellen's yell was heard clearly in the winter air and melted into the sky above.

Like that, they returned to LeitMeritz.

By the time Tigrevurmud Vorn returned to Alsace, one month had passed.

He returned alongside five thousand troops fighting beneath the Black Dragon (Zirnitra) Flag, led by Ellen.

In Alsace, he met with Viscount Augre who rode with one thousand men.

“Though it is a patchwork army, you may use them as you please.”

The previous autumn, he was a young man who could lead one hundred cavalry at best; now he had sixty times this number and would soon attempt to face his enemy.

There were many things he felt uneasy about. There was not yet a response from the King's Capital.

Massas' safety was also a concern, for he was making his appeal to His Majesty, the King.

Tigre marched to the west of Territoire toward Nemetacum, the land Duke Thenardier governed.

A light snow drifted down from the ash-gray sky. Winter had finally begun.